



KUMŌ KAGYU

ILLUSTRATION BY
NOBORU KANNATUKI



GOBLIN SLAYER



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GOBLIN SLAYER



*Everything
came down
to that
instant, to
the pips on
the dice of
Fate and
Chance
rolled by
the gods...*



Contents

- Chapter ❶ I Wanna Be an Adventurer
- Chapter ❷ Dungeon Master's Guide
- Chapter ❸ I Don't Care, I Still Love Adventures!
- Interlude Of How Starting Stats Are Not That Important
- Chapter ❹ I'm Not Afraid of Any Deathtrap Dungeon!
- Interlude Of How There's More to It Than Just Lobbing Fireballs and Slinging Lightning Bolts, but It's Still Good If You Can Do Those Things
- Chapter ❺ A Professional Goblin Slayer
- Interlude Of Starting with Saving the World
- Chapter ❻ *I Still* Wanna Be an Adventurer!

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Witch



GOBLIN SLAYER

❖ VOLUME 13 ❖

KUMO KAGYU

Illustration by
NOBORU KANNATUKI

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NEW YORK

Copyright

GOBLIN SLAYER

KUMO KAGYU

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter 1: I Wanna Be an Adventurer](#)

[Chapter 2: Dungeon Master's Guide](#)

[Chapter 3: I Don't Care, I Still Love Adventures!](#)

[Interlude: Of How Starting Stats Are Not That Important](#)

[Chapter 4: I'm Not Afraid of Any Deathtrap Dungeon!](#)

[Interlude: Of How There's More to It Than Just Lobbing Fireballs and Slinging Lightning Bolts, but It's Still Good If You Can Do Those Things](#)

[Chapter 5: A Professional Goblin Slayer](#)

[Interlude: Of Starting with Saving the World](#)

[Chapter 6: I *Still* Wanna Be An Adventurer!](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)

GOBLIN SLAYER

CHARACTER PROFILES

"I am to goblins what goblins are to us."



GOBLIN SLAYER

A strange adventurer active on the frontier. He is famous for reaching Silver (3rd) rank hunting only goblins.

"Protect, heal, save."
—The Three Holy Tenets of the Earth Mother



PRIESTESS

Works with Goblin Slayer. A sweet young woman who must put up with her partner's antics.

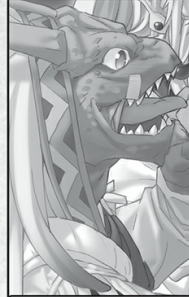
"Before they're polished, jewels and precious metals all look like rocks. No dwarf would judge a thing by its appearance alone."



DWARF SHAMAN

A dwarf spell caster who adventures with Goblin Slayer.

"A naga does not run."



LIZARD PRIEST

A lizardman priest who adventures with Goblin Slayer.

"Train yourself. Kill with the blade. If blood flows, let it be the enemy's." — First of the "Secrets of Steel."



HEAVY WARRIOR

A Silver-ranked adventurer associated with the Guild in the frontier town. Along with Female Knight and his other companions, his party is one of the best on the frontier.

"Ignorance is bliss, for learning is the highest joy." — Dross preach



HIGH ELF ARCHER

An elf girl who adventures with Goblin Slayer. A ranger and a skilled archer.

The only things that matter to her are the weather, the animals, the crops...and him.



COW GIRL

A girl who works on the farm where Goblin Slayer lives. The two are old friends.

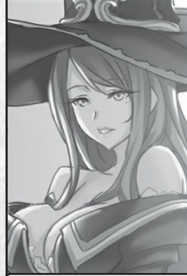
"How can you go adventuring without pen and paper?"



GUILD GIRL

A girl who works at the Adventurers Guild. Goblin Slayer's preference for goblin slaying always helps her out.

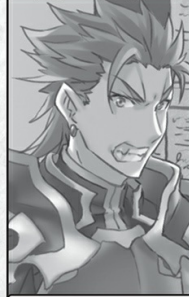
"Only a tangled skein awaits those who curiously spin tales about love or the universe's mysteries...not to mention a woman's beauty."



WITCH

A Silver-ranked adventurer at the frontier town's Adventurers Guild.

"I won't make friends tomorrow with an enemy I respect. I'll do it today."



SPEARMAN

A Silver-ranked adventurer at the frontier town's Adventurers Guild.

"Love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking outward in the same direction." —A poet



SWORD MAIDEN

Archbishop of the Supreme God in the water town. Also a Gold-ranked adventurer who once fought with the Demon Lord.

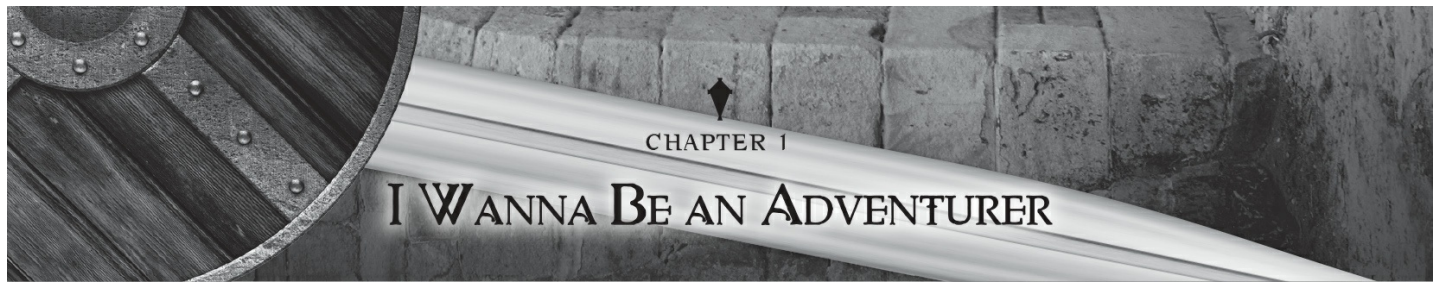
First day of the week, be a magic user; the next, a martial artist;
the third, a dragoon.

On the fourth day, take up your arrows; on the fifth, ride a horse.

Come the sixth day, slip through the darkness as a scout, and at week's end,
be a knight errant.

In your spare time, build a dungeon; fill it with traps and pack it with
monsters, then rub your hands together and wait.

Keep this up for the next millennia and you'll begin to understand
adventuring.



“GOOOROGGB?!”

A dagger, silent in the dark, provoked a scream from the goblin as he toppled to the ground. His death throes echoed through the cave, sending other goblins scrambling.

Downright used to this sort of commotion by now. The cheeky thought crossed Dwarf Shaman’s mind as he watched the darkness vigilantly.

“One...!” Another adventurer, wearing grimy leather armor and a cheap-looking metal helmet, was already off like an arrow.

“Ha! Slow work!” An actual arrow—indeed, no fewer than three of them—went flying past him.

“GBOOBB?!”

“GOBBG?! GORBG?!”

“GRBBGORG?!”

They disappeared so deeply into the cave that even the dwarf couldn’t follow, but moments later three different goblins cried out. When a high elf brought her bow to bear, there was no escape.

“Heh...!” High Elf Archer said, puffing her chest out triumphantly as she stole a glance backward at Dwarf Shaman. He gave a cluck of his tongue; she was acting like a gloating child.

It’s that fat head that keeps me from wanting to give her a real compliment, he thought. Goblin Slayer, meanwhile, had already grabbed the weapon from the hands of the first fallen goblin and was heading for his next target. He could be heard muttering “Two” and “Three,” meaning six of what appeared to be about ten goblins had been eliminated. However...

“Nest this size, doesn’t look like we’ll have a chance to shine, eh, Scaly?”

“Most distressing, I must say,” agreed the massive adventurer beside him. Though their tone was lighthearted, it by no means implied that they had stopped paying careful attention. Lizard Priest trembled visibly, shook his head, and added, “With winter so near, I must move my body as much as I need, lest I grow lethargic.”

Even Dwarf Shaman, who had known this priest for quite some time, wasn’t sure whether he was joking. After all, lizardmen were indeed renowned for their prowess in battle and also for their aversion to cold.

Then again, I thought he joked about being warm-blooded once... No, wait. Weren’t even rats said to hibernate in the winter?

“Maybe so, but at least we can conserve our miracles...” The young girl who served the Earth Mother seemed no surer than Dwarf Shaman about how serious Lizard Priest was being; she smiled ambiguously. She clearly had some nerve being down in a dark cave like this, but she wasn’t terrified. She held her sounding staff firmly and kept her eyes moving. She looked like quite the professional adventurer. He had known her, he reflected, ever since she was a Porcelain, and she had grown and matured quite a bit.

It’s why sometimes they’re called strider—means humans take long steps, thought Dwarf Shaman. Dwarves lived a long time—if not so long as elves—but sometimes humans impressed even him.

Priestess noticed him staring at her and looked back questioningly. “Is anything the matter?”

“Nothin’ at all,” Dwarf Shaman said with a belly laugh. “Just enjoying a bit of a break!” He took a long swig from the jar of fire wine hanging from his hip. It felt good to infiltrate a goblin hideout.

Can’t be letting myself get carried away, though. He wedged a hand between a couple of rocks resting nearby and said, “Hey, Beard-cutter. There’s a tunnel here!”

“Hrm!” The response from the front row was immediate. “Hold the line.” Goblin Slayer calmly smashed in the head of a goblin (Dwarf Shaman had lost count of how many this was) with a crude ax, then came running.

“Wait, what?! Oh, for...!” High Elf Archer, left to handle the front row on her own, predictably objected, but it didn’t seem to actually bother her. Did this represent trust on his part or simply disinterest? Well, let’s assume it was the former.

Dwarf Shaman stroked his beard. This young man with his helmet could be quite the strange one. “He said hold it, and I’m sure you will.”

“A tunnel. Are there goblins?”

“That’s the question, innit?”

Goblin Slayer jammed his torch into the rift. They discovered less a proper hole than a cleft in the rock, a jagged tear too tight for a person to crawl through, but goblins could manage it easily.

“Oh, look...!” Priestess noticed it before Goblin Slayer did: a cloth wedged among the rocks, torn and stained with something gruesome and dark. She took it delicately and studied it.

“The quest didn’t say there had been any captives,” Goblin Slayer muttered darkly.

It was a stereotypical adventure. Goblins had appeared near a village. They hadn’t done any real harm, but the villagers wanted something done about them, preferably soon. Sending in a bunch of hotheaded youngsters would only stir the goblins up and make things more dangerous; that was what the party had been told. It made good sense, and there weren’t actually that many goblins. This would have been suited for novice adventurers; they had known that going in. Not the sort of thing one would ordinarily send a party of four Silvers and a Sapphire to take care of.

But then, that’s Beard-cutter for you. He and his companions were good-hearted enough to take on the quest anyway. Dwarf Shaman nodded. “Lots of people travel alone, by choice or by need. Pilgrims, bards, merchants.”

“What about over there...?” Priestess was asking whether Goblin Slayer had found anyone farther into the cave, but he shook his head. “There was nothing.”

“They used to be just goblins, and now they’re just corpses! Gah, I get so sick

of this!” High Elf Archer exclaimed, firing off one more burst from her bow before bounding up to the group in agitation. It couldn’t have been clearer that she was displeased, but it went in one helmeted ear and out the other for Goblin Slayer.

“How many were there?”

“You’re the only one who bothers to count, Orcbolg!”

“I see.” He nodded with no further reaction, earning an elegant snort from the high elf.

“So we going in?” She nodded in the direction of the rent in the rock. Rocks and earth were supposed to be the dwarves’ specialty, but the high elf looked as comfortable with the idea as any dwarven miner. Such was a descendent of beings from the Age of the Gods—goodness gracious.

Maybe if we had great, ancient Hylar dwarves here, it’d be one thing, Dwarf Shaman thought, taking a pull from his wine bottle and then peering into the rift alongside High Elf Archer. “Think this calls for a little caution.” Taking his own advice, he patted the rock face delicately, feeling the loosened pebbles in his hands. “The stone’s grown thin here. One good whack and it could come tumbling down.”

“So you’re saying it would be best for me to stay here and guard the entrance,” Lizard Priest commented, nodding somberly.

“I think it just means you need to exercise more,” High Elf Archer said, nudging him with an elbow and giggling. Her eyes glinted with mischief, then she turned to Dwarf Shaman and said, “Guess you’d better stay here, too—pretty sure you’d get stuck if you tried to go in there.”

“Bah. Sounds to me like you’re volunteering. You shouldn’t have any trouble fitting, *Anvil*.” Behind Dwarf Shaman, Priestess shifted uncomfortably, but he took no notice. Dwarves and elves had been at each other’s throats for generations untold. Anyway, he wouldn’t want to be friends with someone he hadn’t argued with like this.

“I would like to avoid having one hand pinned.” Goblin Slayer’s assessment was as calm as ever, oblivious to the banter. He tossed his torch down at his

feet, then waved a signal to Priestess.

“Holy Light, right?” she responded promptly, nodding. They were so used to this by now. She clasped her sounding staff with both hands, then intoned a holy prayer to the Earth Mother. *“O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, grant your sacred light to we who are lost in darkness!”*

Quite suddenly, there was a scream.

Deep in the crack, now illuminated by a bright light, hideous monsters writhed and squirmed. Greenskins, goblins, dressed in rags. They raised their arms, trying to shield their yellow eyes, and recoiled from the piercing light.

“GOORGB?!”

“GOBORG?! GOOROG?!”

“Eight. No bows, no casters. Let’s do it!”

“Argh, slow down...!”

Almost the instant he had spoken, Goblin Slayer jumped into the crevice, High Elf Archer following and then overtaking him. A second later, Dwarf Shaman pulled the hand ax from his belt and flung himself after them. “I’m *s’posed* to be usin’ magic...,” he grumbled. But considering that he had left Lizard Priest standing there, he was more than willing to take on front-row duties.

With Priestess’s Holy Light at his back, Dwarf Shaman lashed out with his ax in every direction. It was unlikely that the two in front would let any goblins escape, but if any did, they would find they weren’t getting out of that hole.

Dwarf Shaman saw Goblin Slayer leap forward, flinging a hatchet. The weapon spun through the air, so fast it would have been impossible to count the number of rotations, and then split a goblin’s skull as cleanly as a piece of firewood.

“GBBGBO?!”

“That’s one...!”

“Add two—that makes three!” High Elf Archer pulled back her bow dexterously despite the tight confines, launching three arrows at once. The bud-tipped bolts swept around the stalagmites of the cave, spearing one goblin after

another.

“GOBGR?!”

“GGO?! GOBOGR?!”

Looks like I won't even get a chance to join the fun, Dwarf Shaman thought, squinting to get a good look at Goblin Slayer, who had entered hand-to-hand combat with a clash of weaponry.

Dealing with fewer than ten goblins in a confined space should be the work of a moment. It was all well and good for him to stand back and spectate on the assumption that they would be victorious, but he had his responsibilities as an adventurer to think of. Risk, after all, was part and parcel of the job. Goblins were considered to be among the easiest monsters in the world to hunt, yet even so...

Hrm? Something felt off. Dwarf Shaman squinted into the distance. There was something humanoid back there, something the goblins seemed to have been using as their plaything.

So it went. It was disgusting, even nauseating, but it was a fact of life with goblins. What attracted his attention were the goblins' bodies, which had begun to glow faintly—that hadn't been happening a moment before. It appeared their arms were a little thicker, their bones a little heavier. They weren't large creatures to begin with, but...

Have they put on weight?

There it was.

They looked like they'd had a good meal, a good sleep, and a good time; that's how it seemed to him. It was something like what he'd seen in that desert stronghold...

Maybe they haven't quite made it to hobgoblin yet?

No one in the Four-Cornered World devoted themselves to studying goblins. Beard-cutter, busy murdering the monsters in front of him, might be the closest thing. Dwarf Shaman had no idea how a goblin became a hobgoblin. And what if he did? It was still his job to kill them. The details weren't important.

Now, how a dragon pup becomes a full-grown wyrm, that might be worth knowing.

It so happened that a goblin who'd made a lucky escape came Dwarf Shaman's way at just that moment. He cracked the monster's head open with a single stroke of his ax.

"GROGB?!"

To reiterate: No single goblin demanded a very complicated response.

"Don't worry, I've got things covered here," he said.

"That helps," came the predictably brief response. High Elf Archer called something, too; he couldn't quite tell what, but she sounded okay. Dwarf Shaman shrugged—this was old hat to him—and caught Priestess's eye, then gave a great belly laugh. A few more goblin death rattles and the battle was over.

"I see I was not needed after all," Lizard Priest said in disappointment, poking his head into the hole. Priestess climbed past him. "Eep!" she whimpered; she was used to this, but she still had to be careful not to catch a foot on some rocky outcropping. Maybe she was quick-witted, or maybe simply sharp-sighted, because in just a moment there was a torch in her small hand. The flickering orange light revealed a scene of devastation.

"How awful..."

The woman had clearly expired after being subjected to the most terrible "games" imaginable. It was almost equally clear that the goblins had continued to have their way with her after she was gone. Arms, legs, a couple or three holes, and a lute: That was more than enough for many cruel diversions.

Priestess knelt beside the unfortunate woman, closing what was left of her eyelids. She clasped her hands and prayed for the Earth Mother's guidance in the next life, not only for this woman but for the dead goblins as well. This was partly out of compassion and mercy—but also because if any of them were to come back as lost spirits, it would only mean trouble. Maybe the woman, at least, wouldn't feel the need to return, but still...

"This is why I hate goblin hunting. There's always something like this

involved,” High Elf Archer said from where she leaned against the wall with her arms folded. When she received only the answer “I see,” she glowered and snorted. “Next time, we’re taking on a different kind of adventure. Something fun and exciting and swashbuckling!”

“I see.”

“You’d better!”

Goblin Slayer simply nodded. No doubt he would go on such an adventure if High Elf Archer invited him. In the time since this party had formed, he had in fact been on substantially more non-goblin-related adventures than he had before.

“Then again, every time we have Beard-cutter along, the little devils seem to end up involved somehow.”

“You’re telling me. It’s outrageous,” High Elf Archer said, but her voice wasn’t as sharp as her words, and laughter formed in her throat. “So what’s the story? Do we head deeper in?”

“Well, hold on.” Dwarf Shaman squinted into the darkness. “I’m takin’ a look right now.”

That was when a bit of dirt scattered onto his bald head. His reaction was immediate. He spared a glance right, then left, then shouted back, “Everybody out! It’s collapsing!!”

“Hrm...!”

“Wha—?!”

“Yeep!”

Goblin Slayer was the next quickest to grasp what was going on. He threw down his hatchet and picked up Priestess and High Elf Archer instead, dashing out as fast as he could. “Take care of her!” he called.

“Got it!” Dwarf Shaman wasn’t going to refuse this direct request: He swept up the corpse of the unfortunate woman. She might be dead, but she would never rest peacefully in the same grave as her tormentors. He pounded along toward the exit; ahead of him, Goblin Slayer was already leaping out of the rent

in the stone.

“What seems to be the matter?” Lizard Priest asked.

“The cave’s collapsing.”

“Indeed it is!”

At just about that moment, the puffs of dust and pebbles from the ceiling became a veritable rain. This was no ordinary storm, though; unlike raindrops, being pelted by this precipitation could really leave a mark. Dwarf Shaman, reduced to crawling along, grabbed Lizard Priest’s tail and pulled himself out, after which everyone made a beeline for the mouth of the cave.

“I’m just... I don’t know what to say about this exactly...” The way Priestess sighed, clearly rather tired of being carted around, was charming in its own way.

“Put me down, darnit!” High Elf Archer protested. “I can run on my own two feet!”

“Quit yer yammerin’! We need to get out of here before the whole place comes down on our heads!” Dwarf Shaman snapped, apparently not exerting himself so much that he couldn’t spare a quick quip in the elf’s direction. As Lizard Priest carried him along wrapped in his tail, Dwarf Shaman raised his hands and intoned: *“Come out, you gnomes, and let it go! Here it comes, but take it slow! Turn those buckets upside-down—set us gently on the ground!”*

His invocation gained them the help of creatures so small as to be invisible. They could tell, though, that the ceiling was being pushed upward. Dwarf Shaman nodded. “All right, let’s hurry! They won’t be able to hold out for long!” He had a keen eye.

“There’s the exit!” Priestess called. Beyond was the darkness of a forest at night. Dusk came early in winter; the party was greeted by chill night air, along with the shining of the stars and the two moons.

“There’s nothing better than bursting out into the bright sunlight in times like this,” High Elf Archer said, finally working her way free of Goblin Slayer’s grasp and landing on the ground as delicately as a cat. She gave herself a shake. “Whoa?!” she yelped, covering her long ears when a tremendous, earsplitting roar signaled the goblins’ nest caving in behind them.

A copious cloud of dust blinded the party; Priestess started coughing violently. Dwarf Shaman had reached into the bag at his hip, just in case, and Goblin Slayer was likewise ready. He had drawn the dagger from the scabbard fixed near his armor and was eyeing the cave entrance watchfully. The dust cleared: The cave was no more.

Goblin Slayer sighed heavily. "Buried."

"Looks like," Dwarf Shaman said, carefully setting down the woman's corpse he had carried out.

Making a spell caster do physical labor, yeesh... The quip crossed his mind, but, well, this was part of helping people. It was what it was. All mortals were doomed to die, but surely they wouldn't have wanted to think they would still be a nuisance to others after they were gone. One had to be respectful toward the dead.

"...I'm very sorry," Priestess said after a moment.

"Aw, it's nothing to worry about," Dwarf Shaman replied after taking a quick swig of his fire wine. Ah, a nighttime drink was the best drink of all.

Priestess knelt down and set the ruined remains of the musical instrument in the woman's hands. Was the whisper that fell from her lips born of anxiety, or sadness, or something else entirely? There was no way of knowing whether it would be of comfort to the woman, but in any case, Lizard Priest stood beside Priestess, making his strange palms-together gesture.

"Two different clerics seein' her off. Don't think she'll be coming back as a ghost."

"No, but she will indeed return, following the cycle of all heaven and earth. Perhaps one day she will even be of naga blood."

"...You're right," Priestess said, comforted by their words. Then she nodded. "Does this mean the quest is complete...?"

"Mm," Goblin Slayer grunted. "I wonder." He shook his head slowly from side to side. Even he didn't quite seem to believe it.

"We took out the goblins. We destroyed their nest. We saved the soul of a

dead person. I'd call that a success," High Elf Archer said with pursed lips, sounding surer than either of them. "I admit, it kind of stinks not to make any profit out of it..."

"Ah, that might not be entirely true..." Priestess clapped her hands, suddenly reminded to dig something out of the bag slung across her shoulder.

"Ooh, you find something?"

"We were so busy running that I'm not really sure, but I found this pouch..." She produced an old, rotting but unmistakably high-quality leather pouch.

"Lemme have a look," High Elf Archer said, peering at it. Something glinted inside.

Gems. Small ones, but there were sapphires, emeralds, and even...

"Oh-ho, this is a diamond!" Lizard Priest's eyes spun in his head, perhaps because he was a lizardman or maybe he was getting close to nagahood. The stone he plucked out of the pouch made its way from party member to party member before finally arriving at Dwarf Shaman. He grasped it in his plump fingers, holding it up to the moonlight, revealing a glittering specimen carved by a fine craftsman. "Bit on the small side, unfortunately. Even all together, I doubt we'll get that much for 'em."

"Plus, the goblins didn't notice them. They really don't care about anything that doesn't grab their attention, huh?" High Elf Archer's ears flicked in amusement.

Beside her, Priestess giddily pulled an old sheepskin out of the bag. "Look, there's some kind of scroll in here, too!"

"Hoh." That got Goblin Slayer's attention. He took the tied roll of parchment from her and studied it intently. He didn't have the ability to identify items, of course, nor the wisdom to have any idea what spell might be closed up in there. But he was still well satisfied with this outcome.

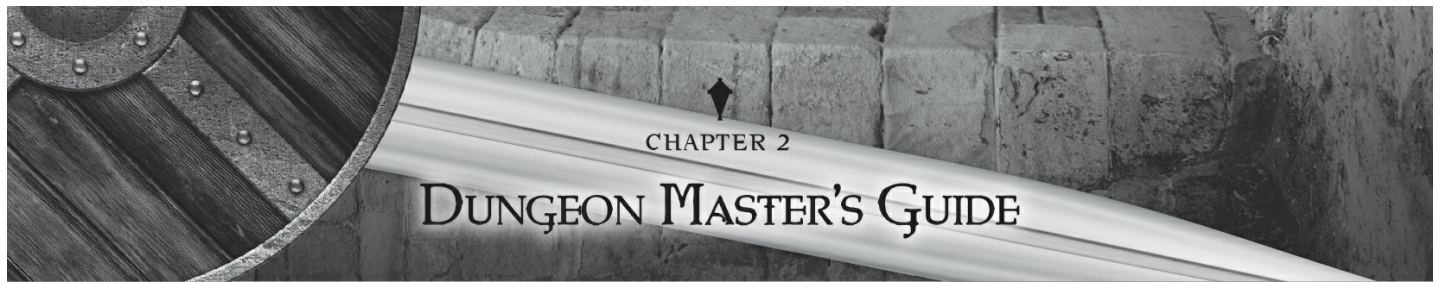
"All right," Goblin Slayer said, placing the scroll carefully in his item pouch and giving it a gentle tap to make sure it was secure. Even that slight gesture was a window into how this strange adventurer was feeling. Dwarf Shaman, noticing the little smiles on the two women's faces, stroked his beard.

Well, can't say I don't understand. To specifically go on a goblin hunt and still end in failure would be too much. Dwarf Shaman gulped down some more fire wine to refresh himself, then quipped, "It's true what they say." The sumptuous underground castles built by the dwarves, or even the subterranean cities of the dark elves, were one thing, but... "The dark depths of a goblin nest darken your heart, too, and the strangest ideas can enter your head."

He gave Goblin Slayer a hearty slap on the back. After a moment's silence, Goblin Slayer responded simply, "That's true," and nodded.

The other adventurers took that as their cue to check themselves over, and then they set out slowly on the road home. They returned to the village and delivered the body to the village chief, and then Goblin Slayer pressed some gold coins into the chief's hand, requesting that they bury the woman. Thus, the next morning a funeral was held with Priestess officiating, and then the party repaired back to town.

A completely standard goblin hunt. A completely ordinary adventure, and nothing more.



“I think we should have a dungeon exploration contest!” Guild Girl said, clapping her hands. All five adventurers had a different reaction. Priestess blinked, High Elf Archer looked at Guild Girl blankly, Dwarf Shaman drank some wine, and Lizard Priest’s eyes spun in his head.

As for Goblin Slayer, he only said, “I see,” and nodded. Then he added, “What is a dungeon exploration contest?”

They were on the second floor of the Adventurers Guild, in a reception room flooded with rich late-morning sunlight. The six of them—Guild Girl and the five adventurers she had summoned, Goblin Slayer and his party—gathered amid a panoply of trophies from notable adventurers’ successful hunts, namely monster skulls and other bits and bobs.

Priestess alone looked a little nervous, but suddenly a smile spread across her face as she thought about how nostalgic the room was. Then again, maybe *nostalgic* wasn’t quite the right word. For one thing, she hadn’t actually been in the room back then. It had been spring, several years ago, when a consultation had been held here about going into some ruins that had been occupied by a vampire. Goblin Slayer had been called in as an expert on goblins, while Priestess had waited awkwardly downstairs.

Other adventurers who had registered at the same time had talked to her, though, and Witch, one of the more experienced adventurers, had offered some comforting words. In the end, Priestess managed to get her emotions under control. So strictly speaking, she didn’t know exactly what had been discussed or how the adventure had been decided upon. But she knew for certain that this party had formed on that day, at that time, in this place.

And now I’m here, too.

She still felt pitifully immature and inexperienced, but she was here, and that fact alone made her heart dance. She fought to keep herself from positively

breaking into a grin, but she saw High Elf Archer glance in her direction. The high elf's gorgeous eyes seemed to see straight through to her childish feelings, and Priestess averted her gaze so as not to notice her prized—but much older—friend grinning like a cat.

Even though Priestess suspected that was exactly what the elf was doing.

“I’m not sure you should be saying ‘I see’ when you don’t see at all,” High Elf Archer said to Goblin Slayer, her voice a mixture of teasing, exasperation, and resignation. She followed it up with a giggle like the ringing of a bell.

It would naturally have to be Dwarf Shaman who shot back at her; even Priestess wasn’t worried by their bickering anymore. “So do *you* know what’s going on, eh?” he asked.

“I do, but... Hmmm.”

Priestess knew how this would go: The two of them would start arguing, Lizard Priest would intervene, and then they would get their explanation. She would watch the whole thing with a smile, while Goblin Slayer sat silently as if none of it had anything to do with him.

“Okay, *you* explain!”

“Huh? Wh-what? *Me?!?*!”

Thus, she felt completely ambushed when High Elf Archer clapped her on the shoulder with an amazingly nimble move. Priestess squeaked, but there was nowhere to hide. She was all too aware that her party mates and Guild Girl were all looking at her.

She somehow suppressed the urge to puff out her cheeks in annoyance. It would be so childish. No complaining, either. She didn’t want them to think she was just a petulant girl. She was a proper member of a party she shared with several Silvers, which had been summoned to a room in the Adventurers Guild.

And I’m going to act like it! She clenched a mental fist and promised herself she would speak as fluently as she was able.

“You’re referring to the story of the battle that the Lady Archbishop and the five other heroes fought a bit over ten years ago, right?”

Truth be told, there were so many songs and stories about the event by now that it was hard to discern what had really happened. Was it a battle with some evil adventurers, or a friendly rivalry, or perhaps something else? The only ones who knew for sure were those who had been there, but there was one fact Priestess was certain of: that the adventurers had been competing in a brutal contest to explore the dungeon.

“Yes, that’s exactly right.”

Priestess let out a breath of relief when Guild Girl smiled and confirmed her story. She’d had her lips tight like an acolyte faced with a question from their Mother Superior.

Terribly childish.

I wonder if they noticed, she thought.

Guild Girl didn’t appear to think anything was amiss, however. “But did you know that contest goes back long before those adventurers?”

“Really?” Priestess asked. They didn’t learn much about such older things at the Temple of the Earth Mother. Perhaps this was history—or perhaps myth.

“I have heard talk of such things myself,” Lizard Priest said blithely, tapping a claw against his chin. He had positioned his massive frame near a window; maybe it was easier for him to stand than to try to use a chair. Then again, maybe this wasn’t about his tail—maybe he merely found it pleasant to bask in the sunlight.

“...Oh, it was nothing, just an event in some town somewhere,” he responded to Priestess’s questioning look with a dismissive wave of his hand. “I believe it involved a particularly notorious dungeon full of deadly traps—yes? No?”

“It sounds like it was hardly more than gambling,” Guild Girl said.

“Yes, but like gambling, it’s exciting, and you might even make a little money,” Dwarf Shaman put in.

“I won’t deny those aspects, but I’ve got a proper, respectable competition in mind,” Guild Girl said, somewhat sharply. Her face still had that pasted-on smile. Of course, maybe it was long acquaintance that enabled them to tell that

it was pasted on. Guild Girl coughed sweetly, then assumed an inscrutable expression before continuing. “New registrants increase in early spring, so I’d like to give aspiring adventurers a chance to experience the job before they sign up.”

“Isn’t that what the training facility is for?” High Elf Archer asked, raising a pointed finger. “And that went up just the other day, right?”

“I know time flows a bit differently for elves, so I hate to have to say this,” Guild Girl began, “but that was a full two years ago.”

“Huh.” Even that disinterested response seemed elegant coming from the high elf.

“In any event, that facility is for people who have already become adventurers, and most importantly, it’s for people who think they need training.”

The facility had gotten safely underway, but in Guild Girl’s mind, it wasn’t yet truly fulfilling its purpose. Many people didn’t much value training and study, and even if they did decide to go to the training ground, there were even fewer people who could impart real, meaningful understanding.

Some people think that’s all you need in a tutorial, but I’m not so sure..., thought Guild Girl.

“So this is a sort of screening process?” High Elf Archer asked.

“Maybe you could say it’s a way of getting them in the right frame of mind. It’s still just an idea, something I’m testing out.”

Best of all, it gives us something to celebrate before the winter.

The long winter. Adventurers might stay busy, but for those who had to simply go to ground, the wintertime could be awfully boring. Maybe they could have something exciting to talk about during the winter season, to help them look forward to spring when they could become adventurers. Something to warm the cold days.

Priestess felt a prickle in her heart at the talk of ignorant novices. But the prickle turned into a wry smile when Goblin Slayer said in his dispassionate way:

“So what does this have to do with me?” He was so blunt; it would have been easy to take him the wrong way, but he truly meant exactly what he said.

“Excuse me,” Priestess started, holding up her pointer finger and pursing her lips as she emphasized each word. “I’m not very fond of the way you said that.”

“Is that so?”

“You have to be careful of your tone, otherwise you’re prone to misunderstandings.”

“Hmm,” Goblin Slayer grunted from inside his metal helmet. “At the very least, though, this doesn’t appear to be a goblin hunt.”

Priestess sighed. High Elf Archer looked at the ceiling as if she couldn’t believe she was hearing this, while the two men grinned at each other.

Guild Girl took these adventurers, with whom she had been working for the past two or three years, to task. “I said I might ask for your help at the winter festival this year.” *Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten*, she seemed to be saying. She leaned forward slightly, fixing each of them with a withering look.

“Yes,” Goblin Slayer replied with a firm nod. “That I remember.”

“And that’s what this is about.”

“It’s about that?”

Guild Girl replied, “It is,” one final time. She almost seemed to be pouting—or maybe reprimanding him—or maybe just teasing him. Girlishness and maturity mingled in her expression in the best possible way.

So even she acts like that sometimes, Priestess thought, somehow happy to realize it. After all, Guild Girl was one of the beautiful, grown-up women Priestess so admired. It tickled her to realize she had a sweet, girlish side, too.

“If we’re going to make this work for aspiring and low-level adventurers, there’s going to have to be supervision.”

“By me?” Goblin Slayer asked.

“That’s right.” Guild Girl grinned broadly. Strictly speaking, she seemed to mean *by all of you*, but that was just a detail. “How would you like to try your

hand at being a Dungeon Master?”

§

There was much to do to prepare for winter, so it was a very busy time of year, but things were different as the winter solstice approached. The solstice marked when the farm would hunker down and pass the season, so it was risky to be *too* busy during that time. Nonetheless, there remained many things to attend to, which was why she and her uncle found themselves peeking into the storehouse that day.

“Looks like we’ve got plenty of sausage,” she said.

“Bacon, too,” her uncle replied, letting out a breath and wiping some sweat from his forehead. “I think we’ll manage. I hope.”

When it came to farming and animal husbandry, it was never possible to be completely certain that everything would be all right. One relied on the mercy of the Earth Mother, the shifting weather, and the gods’ dice. It had been a long winter last year; they would be in trouble if that happened again this year.

Pigs could be left to their own devices and would be ready for slaughter within about a year, but cows took more work. Even pigs, though, needed enough nuts to grow fat. And if the pigs and cows couldn’t grow, it would impact the farmers’ own lives as well. Even supposing they made it through somehow—getting back on their feet and going on to the next thing would be hard.

We were able to offer the wine safely, so things should be okay... Hopefully.

Her awareness of the situation was vague; she hadn’t really been involved in all the hubbub that had persisted from the end of summer through the autumn. And then there was—well. Talk of marriage. They could set that aside for now.

“Erk...” The thought made Cow Girl’s face flush. She shook her head vigorously. There were *other* things to prioritize today. She looked around as if searching for an escape and found the ceiling of the storehouse, the rafters. “I wonder how the snow will be this year.”

“No telling. Hopefully the roof’ll hold...” But maybe he ought to reinforce it, just to be sure. Her uncle frowned, looking up at the diligently tied rafters.

Whether he repaired them or reinforced them, this was the last moment at which to do it. And the farm had no other men to help out—to be fair, if they asked *him*, he would probably help.

“I’ll be the one to take care of the winter work this year.”

“What?” He had beaten her to the punch; Cow Girl’s voice cracked from confusion. She looked over at her uncle to see a sour expression on his face. She had an inkling of why—but she just waved her hand and laughed. “I’m telling you—it’ll be fine. Nothing weird is going to happen this year.”

“Can’t be so sure.” Her uncle sighed and shook his head.

The terrible things that had happened last winter—well, she didn’t much care to remember them. She understood why he was worried, but she wondered if he was overdoing it. *I’m sure it’ll be fine*, she thought. She appreciated his concern, but nonetheless, a wry smile crossed her face.

Suddenly, they heard footsteps at the entrance to the shed, and Cow Girl’s feeble smile turned into a real one.

“I’m back.” Lit by the sun behind him was an adventurer in a cheap-looking metal helmet and grimy leather armor. They were as used to him as he was strange.

Cow Girl immediately jogged up to him, beaming, and said, “Welcome back! You’re early—I thought today was going to be another adventure for you.”

“I thought there would be a goblin hunt, but that wasn’t the case.”

Huh. She nodded. It was good to have work, but it was best if it wasn’t goblins. She’d had that conversation with him once—when had it been?

He’d been gone all morning, leading her to expect that they wouldn’t see him for a few days. What a lovely mistake.

Anyway, all right. They had enough provisions even if he wasn’t able to go on an adventure all winter. To repeat, one never knew what might happen. Thus, one had to be prepared for anything. *Not that I can really picture him just kicking back at home...*

“So you’re back.” While Cow Girl stood entertaining her idle thoughts, her

uncle greeted the newcomer with an exaggerated nod. Then he looked up at the ceiling and said somewhat brusquely—almost *too* brusquely, “I guess even adventurers must find themselves with time to kill over the winter. Help me reinforce the roof.”

“Yes, sir.”

He was nothing if not direct. Her uncle watched the helmet bob up and down with an inscrutable expression, then sighed. “Let’s have something to eat first. We can worry about the roof after that.”

“Yes, sir.”

She knew that if her uncle hadn’t said anything, *he* would have set to work immediately.

Was that Uncle being nice?

The thought made Cow Girl happy somehow. Her uncle let out another sigh, indicated that he would be going ahead back to the house, and then left the storeroom.

“Sure thing!” Cow Girl called after him, and then, still smiling, sat herself down on a barrel. “It’s winter already. Something warm for lunch might be nice. Let me guess—you want stew?”

“Yes,” he said, nodding. “That would be good.”

“Coming right up.” Cow Girl giggled deep in her throat, her face glowing with happiness. It was such a simple exchange but so pleasant. He was so busy, after all, and even when he was here on the farm, he spent most of his time working. She cherished the brief moments they had together. Like this one: She was sure that once he was done eating, he would get right to work on the roof...

As for Cow Girl, she wouldn’t exactly be able to stand around and talk while she was making lunch. So this moment, when she could sit and pepper him with chatter as he stood silently by her, was important.

“...That reminds me.”

“Hmm?”

Unexpectedly, he spoke, and that, too, was important; she perked up her

ears.

“I may not be able to join you for the winter solstice this year.”

“What? Why not?!” She jumped to her feet before she realized what she was doing. She clapped her hands over her mouth—her voice had been, well, not louder than she’d meant, but pretty loud.

“I’ve been asked to help with something,” he replied dispassionately, oblivious to how she was feeling. *For crying out loud.* Cow Girl puffed out her cheeks.

“Something more important than the winter solstice festival?” she pressed.

“Well...” When she looked closely at him, she could see him stumbling over his words behind his helmet. Finally, he said softly, “Apparently they need some help and input from adventurers in order to hold the solstice event.” Once he had successfully gotten this out, he seemed to think perhaps it wasn’t enough, for he added, “The Adventurers Guild asked me to help.”

Hmm... So that was it. Cow Girl made a sound indicating she understood. *Last year was with me, and the year before that, he was with that girl...* So it would make sense that he was with the receptionist from the Guild this year—it was her turn, so to speak. *Hrrm...*

Well, I guess I could let this go, she decided after crossing her arms and studying him intently. It was good to see him taking someone up on something other than goblin hunting. Besides, how could she not let him? It was so unusual to see him hesitant, unsure, even slightly flustered as he tried to explain himself.

“What kind of help do they need?” she asked.

“I don’t really know,” he answered, so softly it was almost a whisper. She was sure he really meant it. “So I must be as ready as possible... At least, I think.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” she said, smiling. “It’s so *you* to take this so seriously.” He simply wasn’t the kind to charge in recklessly and with no plan. “And it all starts with a good meal!”

“Yes,” he said with his usual brusque nod. “Thank you.”

“Just leave it to me!”

How could she hold back now?

§

The first thing he had to do was light the lamp. The shed filled with a soft orange glow, accompanied by the crackling of the wick. Back in the village—no, in fact, even now—candles and oil had been expensive luxuries. His sister would have disapproved of his staying up so late, but the fortunate thing about having money was that one did not have to worry about the time.

He walked past the shelves of items—his old friend called them messy, but in his mind, they were rather organized—until he reached the far end of the shed. There he set down his cargo at his work desk, seated himself, and exhaled. Now he had to think of what to do next.

The lights in the main house were already out. His friend and the farm owner must already have been asleep.

He was going to help the Adventurers Guild with the winter festival... Now that he thought about it, he realized what a ridiculous idea it was. *He* was going to help? He was going to help the *Guild*? He’d hardly imagined his friend and her uncle would believe him, but their response was surprising. At least to him.

While eating the dinner his old friend had prepared, he’d told them—briefly, but carefully in his own way—all about it. She’d smiled and said, “*Give it your best shot!*” while the farm owner had growled, “*Make sure you do a decent job.*” Neither of them had doubted for a second that the Guild had in fact made this request of him.

A decent job, he thought. What exactly was that?

He grunted softly. His metal helmet, to which he should have been so accustomed, felt desperately heavy. Not that he wished to take it off. He had never once in his life done a “decent job” of anything. When he looked back, he could see that it had always been that way. To improvise with whatever was at hand in the moment was far better than to come up with a brilliant idea *after* everything was over.

That didn’t mean, however, that whatever one improvised was always the

best that could be done. In retrospect, he frequently discovered that he had made mistaken choices. He should have done *that* instead—or maybe *this*. There must have been a better way. He could have been more skillful.

Could have moved faster, fought harder, rescued captives, prevented casualties, and still killed the goblins.

There were always flaws in his technique, gaps, imperfections. That he had managed to survive for so long despite that must have been a gift of Fate—or perhaps Chance. Above all, he must not begin to think that his abilities made him better than others. He must not fall prey to the idea that those who had been captured or even killed were less worthy than he.

His older sister hadn't been in the wrong. Nor had the other people of his village. Nor any of the other victims, not even one. To believe he himself had done well was overweening pride.

To someone with such a mindset, what a tremendous goal it seemed to “do a decent job”!

But I must do it.

Everything in the world came down to this: Do or do not. He repeated this teaching of his master to himself, then cleaned the surface of his desk by shoving everything off it. He pushed equipment in various states of maintenance to one side, and in their place, he opened a collection of maps. He'd borrowed them from the receptionist woman at the Guild for the purposes of the current endeavor; they showed the location and interior plan of some ruins.

There were many ancient battlefields near this site; that is to say, places where battles had been fought in the Age of the Gods. There was no telling how many ruined castles slumbered under the terrain here, either. The entrances to such wrecks were discovered rarely (and yet, it must be said, more often than you'd think). Someone might dig up a buried entryway, or a Rock Eater or the like might unearth it accidentally.

One such disused relic, relatively close to town, had been selected for this occasion. It had been discovered sometime before, and adventurers had already thoroughly explored the site—it was a spent ruin, as it were. That

wasn't unusual. The famous Dungeon of the Dead had been similar.

I don't remember this place, Goblin Slayer thought. He looked at the map, drawn in careful brushstrokes, and grunted. Well, he could hardly be expected to remember every single crumbling ruin he'd visited, just as he wouldn't remember every individual goblin hunt. And the number of goblin hunts he'd been on paled in comparison to the number of goblin hunts all the adventurers in the world had collectively undertaken. That was not even to include quests and adventures involving every other type of monster there was. Some anonymous adventurers had challenged these ruins, fought their way through them, explored them, and mapped them out.

Making them a perfect place to set some traps and play at being adventurers, I suppose.

A memory flashed through his mind of a day he'd run and played in the woods, a rough-hewn stick in his hand. Had *she* been there that day? She must have been there sometimes. It was a simple, unremarkable, fuzzy memory. To the extent that he could recognize his own self, perhaps it was no longer a memory but rather a fantasy based on the memory.

He spared a smile for it, then returned his eyes to the map.

A perfectly ordinary dungeon. Halls and chambers. Hidden doors and rooms; that was good. Close to town—also good. Wouldn't be too hard to tell if there were any monsters inside. Very few would think to erase their footprints.

What about goblins?

What about goblins, indeed. They wouldn't attack until someone reached the entrance—probably not even then. The attack would come slightly later. They preferred to draw their prey in and strike where it was hard to advance and hard to retreat.

As for the dungeon walls, they were probably stone. That would make it hard to dig through them and get behind a party. There were limits, even to the sizzling of bacon.

That made traps the first thing, then. Not something that would hit at a goblin's height, but something a human would feel. For example...

A pendulum that comes down from above.

He nodded his metal helmet, then from the items he'd swept aside, he picked out a sand tray. Next, he took a stylus and began sketching out on the sand everything that came to mind. He could finalize his ideas on papyrus or parchment later. For now, all that mattered was getting the ideas out.

A log. A stone. Or perhaps a stolen weapon or some such. A stake. Even a pot or pan might do. That would serve as the pendulum. It would be a classic booby trap: not something that took a person out of the fight, but something that was draining.

Still, it was ostensibly goblins that were setting the trap.

I doubt they would consider dwarves or rheas in their calculations.

No, goblins would be obsessed with imagining themselves striking a blow against the "big guys," and that was where their thinking would stop. Thus, the opportunity would be at one's feet. Crouch down, or crawl, or even just move carefully, and the trap could easily be avoided.

It wasn't particularly elaborate, but novice adventurers wouldn't expect it. They might picture themselves going toe-to-toe in a desperate battle with a deadly monster—but they probably never imagined themselves down on all fours, trying to untie a string. Even on the off chance one of them noticed the trap, only a hunter would be likely to know how to neutralize it.

The goblins would be overjoyed to watch the adventurers worry and puzzle over the trap. They would cackle away. The adventurers always ridiculed goblins as stupid, but look at the goblins leading them around by the nose! Now they knew who was on top and who wasn't.

It is we who will kill, and they who will die.

The goblins wouldn't register the danger they were in by the simple fact that their nest had been invaded. He himself, however, must not forget that fact. For he had come to hunt the goblins.

Is this a goblin nest? Goblin Slayer's hand suddenly stopped, and the scratching of the stylus in the sand ceased. Perhaps it was a wizard or an evil dragon hiding down here. He considered it for a second, then gave up the

thought.

It was a foolish idea.

There were endless adventures in the world. Some involved goblins and some didn't, the latter clearly being the more numerous.

I should approach this as a goblin hunt, he thought. That was all he knew. He didn't want to become one of those fools who was eager to talk of things he knew nothing about.

Yes: He was Goblin Slayer. He was not an adventurer, or at least he didn't think of himself that way. There were much better role models out there for aspiring adventurers. Heavy Warrior, Spearman, and the other Silvers. Or perhaps...

The hero of whom I hear rumors.

But there was no need to invoke such extraordinary people. There was that warrior, the one who'd had his hands full trying to use his club, and his friend; or the boy wizard and his companion who swore they were going to defeat a dragon. Above all, there were the party members who had been so good as to work with him—including that priestess. Such people were more than suited to serve as exemplars of adventuring.

So why had he been chosen? It was the receptionist woman who had chosen him.

Merely because she's partial to me, then. The thought set his mind somewhat at ease. It wasn't that he took her feelings lightly. He simply wasn't accustomed to people expecting much of him.

A boy who'd just delved his first dungeon was more of a hero than he was, more of an adventurer. So this swirl of thoughts he was getting lost in—it hardly mattered. This wasn't like facing the unknown. He knew that much.

This is more like an illness.

Something that bubbled suddenly to the surface after a long time of doing the same thing over and over. It wasn't anxiety, nor lack of confidence. It was more like a voice that whispered in his ear that he was helpless and worthless.

People appeared and disappeared in flashes of light in his mind's eye, coming and going like froth in a quick-running stream. It was something that happened periodically, and that made it nothing more than another flare-up. He knew how to deal with them.

Goblins, that was the point. If he encountered any, he would smash them. Goblins had made a nest in his own mind. In that case...

Do or do not.

Those were the only choices. There could be no others.

Goblin Slayer took in a breath and let it out. Air, suffused with dust and the smell of oil, filled his lungs. There were maps in front of him. He had a broad idea. A goblin nest. Very well.

"I will go see it for myself, then."

It was just the same as always.

§

"Roads go ever on and on, over rock and under tree, by caves where never sun has shone, by streams that never find the sea..."

High Elf Archer was in a mood so good it seemed like it must come around only about once every two thousand years. Well, such jollity had been scarce these last few years, but that was all right. The rolls of the dice averaged out over the course of an almost eternal lifetime. More notably, on the lips of a high elf, even a rhea's little ditty sounded elegant.

"Another of those old tunes?" Dwarf Shaman groaned. "Can't imagine anyone else even remembers 'em anymore."

"Huh, I think a good song stays good no matter how old it is." High Elf Archer twirled around where she walked at the head of the line, sending her long hair billowing. She smiled and started to walk backward.

The sunlight was subdued and the plains green. This was an adventure all its own, on the cusp between summer and winter, another year nearing its end. Elves truly were made for the great outdoors, not for cities of stone. Hustle and bustle could make the heart leap, but nothing was so comfortable as a gust of

wind carrying birdsong.

She could feel the grass under her tall boots as she went along lightly. The weak sunlight brushed her skin. She took it all in with a breath, filling her modest chest, and then she laughed gaily. “You could do with learning a song or two yourself,” she said, bounding up beside Priestess, moving almost as quickly as her own giggle. “It’s an old adventuring custom. Doesn’t matter if you’re a good singer—an adventurer with no songs is, well...”

“G-gee, really?” Priestess said, somewhat intimidated to find this inhuman beauty right next to her so suddenly.

“Really!” High Elf Archer replied, quite oblivious to the possibility that she was the source of the young woman’s befuddlement. “Nothing’s worse than just marching around looking like a big, grim adventurer all the time, with nothing in your head but how to hunt goblins!”

“Can’t deny the logic, but don’t you go listening to her,” Dwarf Shaman cautioned, chuckling himself over High Elf Archer’s little swipe at the man who now walked at the head of their formation. “Long-Ears here has an awful lot of years behind her but not much common sense to show for it!”

“Shut your mouth—the forest is a much bigger place than down in the dirt where *you* live.”

“If sheer size be the determining factor, then one must say those who live in the ocean know more about the world than any of us,” Lizard Priest quipped, quite unperturbed by the ongoing argument. Business as usual.

This lighthearted—one might say peaceful—atmosphere had kept up ever since they’d left town. Their destination wasn’t far off, after all. This was practically a day trip.

Maybe calling it a picnic would be going too far, Priestess thought. She also couldn’t help noticing it might have been more agreeable had the season been early spring. But so it went.

Of course, they couldn’t afford to get *too* caught up in the merriment. It always happened: You took one step outside of town and ran smack into a dragon. The pips of the dice were unfathomable to the minds of people. In

truth, even High Elf Archer, who was thoroughly enjoying herself, was keeping a vigilant watch in every direction, including above them, and listening closely. Priestess knew her other companions were likewise keeping their eyes peeled.

No, bad! Priestess admonished herself for getting distracted—but she was also pleased to be able to relax with the others. There was always an air of anxiety when leaving on an adventure, but today, she didn't feel it. That was largely because...

"We were lucky to get perfect weather today," Guild Girl said, grinning. "Rain would have ruined everything. I have to admit, I never expected you to take me up on this."

"I see," replied a quiet, almost mechanical voice. It rang hollow inside the metal helmet. "However, I believe this was our agreement."

"Yes, it was!"

Guild Girl was especially bubbly today, but that made sense to Priestess. The receptionist was wearing an embroidered shirt edged with lace (a blouse—was that the word?) and long leather pants. A leather bag hung from her shoulder, no doubt packed with useful items. She was wearing a thick overgarment as well. Her hair was in its usual braid, but it seemed lighter and looser today. The overall effect made her look lively and adventurous, a feeling completely different from that conveyed by her usual Guild employee uniform.

It wasn't exactly an outfit to wear out on the town, but it looked refined and pretty. Guild Girl was a daughter of the nobility—just like their friend who had become a merchant, although also somehow different...

I wish I could be like them, Priestess thought, quietly letting out a breath. Never mind that she had always been taught to value frugality or that her own savings wouldn't get her anywhere near such clothing even if she hadn't. *And it probably wouldn't look good on me even if I managed to get some.*

Back when she had first become an adventurer, she had truly been a child; she liked to think she'd matured at least a little bit by now. But even so, she still felt so young.

"Different things look good on different people," Guild Girl said. Priestess

didn't *think* she'd read her mind, but she couldn't be sure. Guild Girl turned back and gave her a bright, easygoing smile, but Priestess was envious of that, too. "Personally, I wish I could wear adorable dresses like you. And you have that lovely golden hair."

"Er, a-adorable? I—I don't..." *...don't think so.* She couldn't help thinking it felt wrong to grow even more humble when someone tried to compliment her. So after a long moment's hesitation, Priestess swallowed heavily and finally managed: "Th-thank you very...m-much..."

"No, thank *you*. Besides, worrying about who's prettier seems a little silly when there's a high elf around."

High Elf Archer's ears twitched where she walked, framed by the spreading glory of nature, and she gave a dismissive wave of her hand. "Nah, I'm pretty average by elf standards."

"That's not very heartening to hear." Guild Girl sighed; then her eyes met Priestess's, and they both broke out giggling. They were helpless, being compared with this almost supernatural beauty. Their friend, so much older than they, seemed apt to look good in whatever she wore—she could be pretty or cute or whatever she wanted.

The woman in question, still in excellent spirits, looked as if she might start humming again. "So the place for this...dungeon exploration contest or whatever it was. Is it far away? Or are we almost there?"

"Er—," Guild Girl started, but it was Goblin Slayer who answered brusquely, "It's close."

"Close?" High Elf Archer said, her ears twitching. "How close is *close*? A couple hours? A couple days?"

"Could be a couple years!" Dwarf Shaman interjected, earning himself a glare and a "Pipe down!" from the elf.

In fact, it was indeed *close*, as Goblin Slayer had said. Even Priestess, who spent the rest of the walk listening to the elf and the dwarf argue, could recognize it. There, just over the next hill or two, stood a yawning entrance. The very hill must have been a moss-covered funerary mound. Among the vines and

grass roots, she could glimpse a square clearing—a gate standing open, though nearly buried in fresh earth. It leaned over with grime and with many years, but it had once been of pure-white stone construction.

Was this...a temple? Priestess wondered. That was what it looked like to her, even from a distance. Maybe she would be able to make out some details when they got a little closer.

“Oh! There it is. That’s it—I can see it!” Guild Girl called, squinting and finding the place a moment after Priestess did. Priestess felt a touch of surprise to realize she had spotted it before Guild Girl; she blinked several times.

High Elf Archer and Dwarf Shaman surveyed the area even as they argued. They must have noticed. Lizard Priest, of course, and Goblin Slayer, too, had excellent scouting skills and sharp gazes. So even things that might not normally have bothered a person, they would—no, no, maybe it was just coincidence.

“Experience does tell, doesn’t it?” Lizard Priest said, lazily turning his long neck to glance at Priestess and sounding as if he could read her thoughts. “Often is it said that looking is not the same as seeing—it matters greatly whether one knows what one is observing.”

I get it...I think? Priestess thought—although she only barely understood—and looked once more toward the ruins. If she wasn’t used to this, would it simply have looked as if one corner of the hill had caved in slightly? She felt as if she would have noticed it even back when she had first started adventuring—but it was just that, a feeling. *Maybe that means I could stand to have a little more self-confidence...*

She put her finger to her lips and lost herself in thought for a moment before she nodded a couple of times and clenched her fist. She *would* be confident in herself. That’s precisely what she would do. That was the answer. A lack of confidence was one of her weaknesses. Take that recent riddle contest—she’d been successful, hadn’t she? She had to take pride in her small but steady victories.

All right, I’m going to give it my best shot...! she told herself, then nodded firmly once again.

“Perhaps we should conceal the entrance.” Goblin Slayer, showing no evident

concern about the state of the rest of his party, strode forward. Priestess, perfectly used to this, pattered along behind him like a small bird, while Guild Girl rushed to follow them.

Goblin Slayer approached the entrance of the ruins—the temple—and knelt down, almost in a posture of prayer, but of course, that wasn't what he was doing; Priestess knew at a glance that he was taking a careful look around. For her part, she quickly made the holy sigil with her hand, then likewise started investigating the area.

They were quiet; they were careful. There were no footprints, no awful smells such as of waste, filth, or fornication.

"I don't see any sign of goblins," Priestess said softly.

"Nor do I," Goblin Slayer replied with a nod of his helmeted head. Priestess was well aware that High Elf Archer must be scowling behind, as if to say: *There it is!* This was an important step, though, and Priestess didn't think it should seem that unusual.

"Er, what's this about hiding the entrance?" Guild Girl ventured. She didn't seem to have fully grasped the significance of their conversation. She had placed her hands on her knees and bent forward to peer into the ruins, as if afraid of getting her clothes dirty. The fact that she didn't so much as wobble despite her distinctly unstable posture was testament to her everyday efforts to keep herself fit. Priestess seemed to remember Guild Girl telling her once that physical exercise was crucial to the maintenance of beauty and health.

Meanwhile Goblin Slayer, still hunting around on the ground, replied simply, "Goblin nests aren't always so easy to find."

"*Ahem*, no. No, we're not doing that," Guild Girl said, her smile still gentle but her tone thoroughly negative; she shook a finger at him. "If they quit without even finding the way in, it defeats the point."

"That happens sometimes."

"I suppose it may, but this is not going to be one of them."

"I see" was the brief response, and then he got slowly to his feet. He gave a quiet grunt. "So this will begin inside."

“That’s right.” He hadn’t really been talking to Guild Girl, but she didn’t seem to realize that. She put one hand on her hip and pointedly raised a finger on the other, looking as satisfied as a teacher with an obedient student.

Priestess was unable to hold back a giggle at the sight of Guild Girl and Goblin Slayer confronted with each other. “Um,” she said, hoping to mask the sound, “in that case, we’re going to need a scout...”

“You called?” High Elf Archer said, rushing past almost before her voice could reach Priestess’s ears. She went with long, light steps, almost like she was skipping, all but dancing into the entryway. A moment later—it wasn’t actually that much longer—Dwarf Shaman came trotting behind her.

“Pretty old place,” High Elf Archer observed. “Think it was a temple or something?”

“Careful what yeh call *old*, lassie—it might be younger than you.”

“That’s your subjective opinion. We need to be objective, here.”

An elf’s sharp senses were perfect for scouting around, and there was no one in the world who knew more about buildings and architecture than a dwarf. Even as they bantered, Priestess knew they were looking carefully for any signs of traps or monsters.

“Even so... I mean, it certainly is old.” Priestess let out a breath, glad to let the other two handle this, and looked at the ruins. The way the hole sat open, smack in the middle of the hill, she was surer than ever that the hill itself was a temple and this was the entrance. The gate, supported by a series of round pillars, was buried in fresh earth. Any door it once had was long lost, the way inside marked by a series of white paving stones spidered with small cracks.

Are they leading downward...? If so, then the temple must descend deep, making it bigger than it looked. It was even possible this hadn’t originally been an entrance but a window long, long ago. Priestess wondered how a structure that had once been on the surface could end up a ruin buried underground. Perhaps her own world would be buried centuries hence.

But then, there are things that will survive on the surface all those hundreds of years. Mountains and trees and the like. Perhaps some especially ancient

castles and temples, as well. Maybe a priest of the God of Knowledge might know. Or perhaps no one cared enough. *The Four-Cornered World is full of mysteries...*

In any event, though, she needed to get a light ready. Unlike their companions, the three humans couldn't see in the dark.

"I'll get a lantern out!" Guild Girl said excitedly, beginning to dig through her bag, but Priestess said, "Oh, don't worry; I've got it," and lit a torch. Having the torch and flint tucked along the outside for easy access was a little idea she'd come up with. Nothing to brag about—just something that had occurred to her as she adventured.

"You're quite used to this, aren't you?" Guild Girl said.

"Yes, ma'am," Priestess replied, hoping she didn't sound too boastful or pleased with herself. She could feel Lizard Priest silently watching her as she jumped into action. How must she look to him? And not just to him, but to Guild Girl and Goblin Slayer as well? Priestess didn't know, but the thought left her feeling oddly self-conscious, so she decided to try changing the subject. "Speaking of lanterns, what will we do if one breaks?"

"What do you mean by that?" Guild Girl asked.

"Oh, just that there will be a lot of people participating, right?" Priestess, with her sounding staff in her right hand and the torch in her left, made a broad gesture. "I'm sure someone will break something or drop their equipment."

"Ah..." Guild Girl blinked and frowned—maybe the possibility hadn't occurred to her before, or maybe she'd considered it and had been unable to come up with any ideas—but a second later, a truly beautiful smile blossomed on her face. "Maybe they can pay for it themselves?"

"Maybe..."

"Practically speaking, we don't want people to become accustomed to us providing everything for them free of charge, now do we?" Guild Girl had no qualms about stating this bluntly. Priestess felt a little funny about it, but she had to admit she could understand where Guild Girl was coming from. One wouldn't want people to believe that adventurers ordinarily had everything

given to them. Nor that adventuring was a completely safe pursuit where success was guaranteed.

But then, do we want people getting injured or even killed? Presumably not—but it was a tricky balance to strike.

“Don’t think I see any monsters around anyway,” High Elf Archer said.

“Goodness...,” Lizard Priest offered.

“And trap-free, to boot. Can’t vouch for what might be deeper in, I guess, but these ruins seem spent, all right,” Dwarf Shaman said.

“Does it look like we could set some traps of our own?” Goblin Slayer asked his companions as they returned. How much did he grasp?

“S’pose it’d depend on what kind,” Dwarf Shaman replied.

“That’s a good point,” Guild Girl added, then thought for a moment. “Anything that won’t destroy the ruins, I guess.”

“Anything that won’t destroy the ruins...,” Priestess repeated uneasily, and she was quick to add, “I—I think we should go with traps that will be obvious, too...”

“Hrm...,” Goblin Slayer grunted. Priestess felt relief rush through her small chest. She knew that if she said something, he would think seriously about it. So she thought it would be fine. Probably. Most likely.

“This is all a bit vague,” Dwarf Shaman grumbled, stroking his beard. “Hasn’t anyone got anything else to say?”

“I was thinking we would start with something simple.”

“Examples, Beard-cutter. We need concrete ideas.”

“The ground around the entranceway is still dirt, isn’t it?” came the question from under the metal helmet.

“’Tis,” Dwarf Shaman confirmed. “And I think we could get away with pulling up those paving stones.”

Goblin Slayer went on: “In that case, I suggest a hole large enough for one leg, covered by two boards with nails in them. When someone steps on it, they trap

the leg and—”

“No,” Guild Girl said before he could get any further—still smiling.

Goblin Slayer’s helmet shifted slightly. “When coated with poison, a trap like that can ensnare even a tiger or bear.”

“We’re dealing with would-be adventurers, not big game.”

“...To be clear, I don’t intend to poison the trap.”

“That doesn’t make it okay.”

High Elf Archer was nodding assiduously: *Yeah, definitely. Not cool. What’s he thinking?*

“I see,” Goblin Slayer answered quietly. Then he grunted, as if this was proving more difficult than he anticipated, and placed a hand on the wall. After a moment of intense thought, the helmet turned toward Guild Girl and offered what Goblin Slayer evidently thought was an inspired suggestion. “What if I don’t put nails in the boards, then?”

“Ummm...” Guild Girl cocked her head. Priestess was impressed by how her smile never slipped. *I couldn’t do that*, she thought.

In any case, though, Guild Girl was no expert when it came to traps and couldn’t come up with a further objection. Then again, maybe she could, but she had no way of knowing if it was a valid one. She sighed, said something about how it was a good thing she’d come along, and then nodded in resignation. “Well, I suppose that’s all right...”

“Good.”

It was not, in fact, good, Priestess thought, frowning. *Still, that trap...*, she reflected. It wouldn’t do any harm remembering it, setting aside the question of whether it was appropriate for a friendly game involving novice adventurers.

A bear trap. A bear trap. She mumbled the process for making it to herself several times, then shook her head. “Come to think of it, those traps you set back during the harvest festival...” *What were they again?* she thought. She gestured in the air with her staff and torch, spinning them in circles. “The things where the spikes come in from the side... Are they a variety of the same kind of

trap?”

“It’s a simple but convenient device. Useful in hunting,” Goblin Slayer said with his typical brevity. He thought for a moment, grunted “Hrm,” then turned his helmeted head toward Priestess. “If you’re interested, I’ll teach you how to make them.”

“Yes, please!”

High Elf Archer looked up at the ceiling, but if she was praying, it probably didn’t reach the Earth Mother—for *she* must have been covering her face, too.

As exasperated as High Elf Archer was by this exchange between master and student, Guild Girl was listening intently. Dwarf Shaman and Lizard Priest looked on with amusement.

“Devious trick, eh?” said the dwarf.

“We lizardmen have been known to do something similar.”

“You’ve got to be kidding!” Dwarf Shaman burst out.

Lizard Priest, though, replied, “Hardly,” with a flick of his tongue. “We live among the swamps, you see. We find a nice pond or a ford at a stream, and deep in the mud we plant a stake...”

“So it goes clean through the foot of anything that steps in the water? Ugh, no more, please. You’re makin’ me ill...”

“Heh—heh-heh. He who quails on the battlefield will not survive its rigors, will he not?”

You know, I feel like we used a similar kind of trap back on the snowy mountain, Priestess thought, even as she committed Goblin Slayer’s words to memory. There had been a pond in a cave on that mountain, which they had discovered when they broke into the goblins’ ritual site. Priestess glanced down at her feet; she was wearing her favorite white boots. *I guess adventurers really do need to be thoughtful about their footwear.*

Goblin Slayer was. Not that the shoes she had on were a bad choice.

“However,” Lizard Priest added, rolling his eyes in his head and seeming to respond to Priestess’s anxiety, though he probably hadn’t noticed it, “this is an

adventure—a monster hunt. To have it serve as a training exercise for young adventurers on top of all that might be a bit much...”

“Anyway, not sure goblins would be clever enough to dream up this trap,” Dwarf Shaman said.

“They wouldn’t,” Goblin Slayer replied flatly. “But we should act as if they would.”

“We did run into one once. A trap like this, that is,” Priestess said, nodding. Even on that tragic first adventure of hers, a goblin hunt—bursting through the wall behind the party was certainly a kind of trap. There was a big difference between approaching the situation knowing that might happen and not knowing it.

Goblin Slayer began muttering: “We could also have a trap that will spring if the rope is carelessly cut. And if they should avoid that trap, there could be a pit right after it.” Maybe an automatic bow trap, too. Ideally, the trap would be set into the wall, but if need be, they could create an artificial mound of dirt and bury it there. The pit trap didn’t have to be too deep—just deep enough to immobilize someone. The victim would be thoroughly distracted, and their friends would focus on trying to get them out. The chances they would notice a pile of dirt with an unusual arrow slit were not good.

“I s’pose we could pull up the paving stones, dig the pit trap underneath, and then put ’em back—they’d never notice.”

“...If they ran into all those traps at once, don’t you think they’d just go home?” High Elf Archer said, clearly annoyed. “I sure would!”

Presumably she wanted to imply that adventures shouldn’t consist solely of traps. Goblin Slayer’s response—“Of course”—seemed to be referring to something entirely different. “The important question is how we exhaust them by the time they reach the enemy but also make it impossible for them to escape. It would defeat the purpose if they were able to leave.” High Elf Archer’s pointy ears drooped farther and farther with every word Goblin Slayer said.

Priestess honestly found it kind of cute how the elf’s ears continually angled downward. *Sure, the whole thing seems a little mean-spirited...* But it could

potentially be helpful, and she didn't think they had anything to lose by hearing Goblin Slayer out.

"A simple barrage might also be effective," he continued. "Unlike with traps, they may choose to soldier on in the face of simple exhaustion. And when they get deeper in—"

"Um, may I say something?" Guild Girl asked, hesitantly raising her hand and interrupting the lecture. She looked unsure of herself but also quite serious; she really wanted them to understand what she had to offer. "I was hoping our would-be adventurers would leave the experience thinking, 'That was tough and scary sometimes but also kind of fun.' However, when it comes to 'educating' them by injury, trauma, or humiliation...", Guild Girl continued before concluding, "I'd, well, rather not go down that route."

"Hrm..."

"I was thinking of something a little, you know...softer. Gentler. Kid gloves."

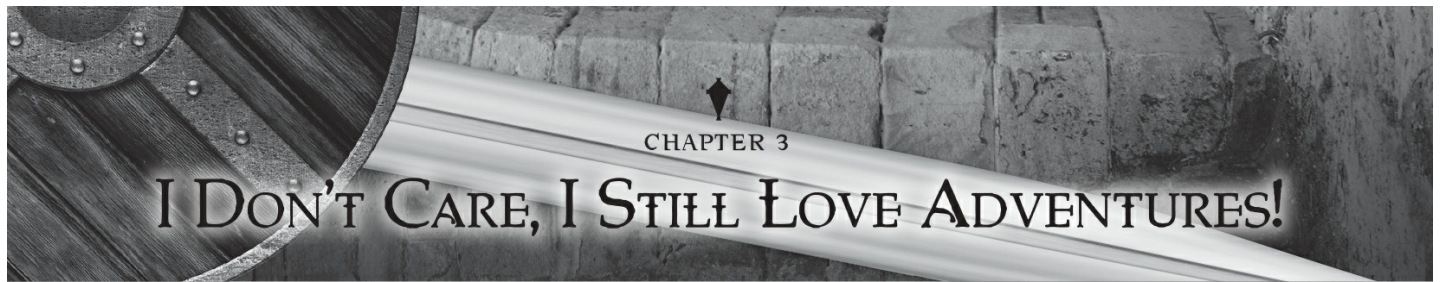
Goblin Slayer grunted quietly, then fell silent for a long time. In his memory, he was trapped at the bottom of a melted water column, his master pitching snowballs full of rocks at him and cackling. That was quite early on in his training, so he had no doubt that his master had in fact been taking it easy on him.

In other words, he thought, I won't be allowed to tie them up and throw them in freezing snowmelt.

He nodded his helmeted head. "Then I'll reconsider."

"Please do." Guild Girl bowed to them, far more deeply than one might ever have expected from a noble. With any other adventurer—Spearman, for example—it would have been enough to ensure absolute and unyielding effort.

"Yes. So much for traps... Next is monsters." But he was Goblin Slayer, and his response was no more elaborate than usual. "Shall we say goblins?"



“There’s no way the likes of *you* could be an adventurer!”

“You think so?”

“Sure do!”

The boy puffed out his chest self-importantly toward the girl, their conversation barely carrying over the cacophony.

The girl, a scrawny thing with grayish-black hair, acted as if the boy’s words hardly registered with her. She looked so calm—even though he was sure it was a put-on and that she didn’t understand anything. The boy laughed.

It had all begun with a simple errand.

A boy from a frontier village had a chance to go to town alone only once in a blue moon. He was overjoyed by the prospect, feeling his entire life had led up to this moment as he spent half a day working his way into town.

Then, just like that, it seemed to him that in the space of that same half day, the moment his entire life had led up to was over: To his complete astonishment, he ran into a girl from his village who had come to town on the same day. As if that wasn’t infuriating enough, she even had a *sword* at her hip. This, when the boy wasn’t even allowed to touch a weapon! It made him livid.

He couldn’t believe she was walking around with such a thing. She could barely carry it for the weight; it made her lean to one side. If it had been him with the sword, he would have stood up straighter, walked prouder.

When he’d asked her, “*What are you doing here?*” she’d answered, “*Daddy asked me to run an errand.*” As if it were no big deal!

“*Yeah, well, I’ll bet you got lost on the way.*”

She must have; he was sure. But she’d only replied “*Maybe?*” as if what he was saying had gone clean over her head.

Did that mean she was done with her errand already, then? The boy felt another inexplicable flash of anger. *“Why are you just standing here like an idiot, then?”* he’d demanded.

“Well, where else would I stand?” the girl had said, clearly a bit confused. *“We’re right in front of the Adventurers Guild.”*

She tilted her head as if she thought this ought to be perfectly obvious to him, and it enraged the boy. That was when he uttered the first words that came into his head: *“There’s no way the likes of you could be an adventurer!”* And that brought them to their current exchange.

“They’ll let anyone with an ounce of muscle on ‘em join up, y’know?” the boy went on.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, and most of *them* barely scrape by. You’d probably end up sold off somewhere pretty much right away. Don’t think they’d get much of a price for you, though.” The boy was simply parroting something he’d picked up from his parents; he didn’t really understand what it meant to sell someone off. He was confident about the price part, at least. After all, she was a rough-and-tumble kid whose dad had been a mercenary before he’d set up shop on the fringes of their village. Plus, she was stumpy and scrawny. Nothing like the older girls of the village who’d had to sell themselves off during that famine years ago.

The boy could never understand why they even let someone like this live in their village. That was why he didn’t see the contradiction in what he was saying. Namely, that *“anyone with an ounce of muscle”* could become an adventurer, but somehow this girl couldn’t. Given the way he was thinking, maybe he didn’t even see it as a contradiction.

“You know adventurers fight monsters and ghosts and stuff, right? Do you even realize that?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I think you’d have your hands full even chasing away some rats or goblins with a stick.”

“You’re not wrong...”

The boy smirked and snorted. Goblins, rats—even he could deal with them. He couldn't stand the way the girl got all full of herself over that sort of thing.

She was always like this. Whatever you said to her, she just gave you that innocent look, like it didn't mean anything to her at all. Where did she get off acting all high-and-mighty? She lived in a shack. Who cared if her dad used to be a mercenary or whatever?

She spent all day every day swinging a stick with those lanky arms or otherwise doing repairs on the villagers' farm equipment. Anyone could do that stuff. She was pretty much just playing around. She was nothing like him—he spent all his time diligently helping his parents in the fields or coming to town on important errands like this one. And *she* was going to be an adventurer? There was full of yourself and there was *full of yourself*.

"You could never handle a bandit gang—let alone a dragon. You wouldn't last a second." He took a step forward and jabbed her in her puny chest, causing her to yelp "Eep!" and stumble a little. The boy sneered at the pathetic display. "I mean, geez, do you even have the money for some armor or a helmet?" he said.

He knew the answer perfectly well. He knew the girl's father couldn't possibly have saved that much. She might try to borrow her dad's old equipment, but the boy was certain it wouldn't fit her (even though he'd never seen it). Sure, she had that sword at her hip, but it was so heavy it pulled her to one side. She could barely carry it—she'd never be able to swing it around. (Not like him!) Then again, maybe he wasn't comparing them so directly in his mind.

"It's true; we don't have that much..." she said.

"Which is exactly why you could never be an adventurer!" This was, as far as the boy was concerned, an immovable fact; he could work out the exact reasons later. The girl didn't say anything, which the boy took as a sign that he'd won. He grinned triumphantly and said, "I remember years ago, when you got lost in the woods and came home crying!"

"..."

"If you tried to be an adventurer, I'll bet it'd happen again—you'd come running back, crying the whole way." But he wouldn't want a feckless idiot like

that back in their village. He wondered how she would react if he told her that—what kind of face she would make. Right now, she was looking at the ground, and he couldn't see her expression.

“That so?” she asked, almost in a whisper.

“Sure is!” he said, almost as if he was pushing her murmur aside with his pronouncement. The boy nodded, thoroughly pleased with his own cleverness. “Anyway, see ya. Unlike you, I’m busy. I gotta do the job I came here for!”

He practically knocked her out of the way. There was a weak “Oof” from behind him—he could hear her stumble, or maybe she fell on her butt—not that he paid that any mind. It didn't really matter to him what she said. He didn't even have to give her the time of day. He was the oldest son of his family—someday he would get the fields for himself. He was a different class of person from a girl who lived in a shack.

The girl sat there for a moment longer staring at the ground, then slowly climbed to her feet. Without a word, she dusted herself off—then looked up at the entrance to the Guild. There was something there the boy had completely missed. A single sheet of parchment. It was a beautiful piece of paper, decorated with ornate letters. They were holding an event for adventurer hopefuls.

Maybe the boy hadn't been able to read it. Then again, neither could the girl. But she'd heard what someone had said when they'd passed by the sign.

“A dungeon exploring contest,” the girl whispered to herself.

But of course nobody heard her speak; her voice was lost in the bustle.



“What do you mean, I can’t participate?!” Female Knight howled.

“Why would you think you could?” Heavy Warrior shot back.

They were in the tavern at the Adventurers Guild, having a hearty meal before they went out on an adventure. One wouldn’t normally order alcohol on such an occasion, but they somehow seemed a bit tipsy.

“It’s an event for beginners and would-be adventurers,” Heavy Warrior went on. “A promotional thing. They only want rank amateurs.”

“You’re being silly. The path of faith is long and severe—on the road of devotion, I’m still only an amateur myself.” She hadn’t even been granted a proper miracle yet—a point Heavy Warrior knew better than to observe aloud.

Scout Boy didn’t, though: “Sis, you don’t even have any miracles yet,” he said. Druid Girl shook her staff at him and gave him a kick in the shins under the table, provoking a shout.

“I admit, it’s a bit lonely not to be able to be part of the winter event,” she said, sitting primly in her seat and completely ignoring her party member rubbing his leg and groaning. The fact that she’d started her adventuring career by lying about her age had been a hit to her credibility, but she had proved herself a capable spell caster and a fully deserving member of the group.

“We might not be able to participate, but I’ll bet we can be involved somehow,” Half-Elf Light Warrior said. His tone was conciliatory; he might have been speaking to Druid Girl, or he might have been trying to calm down Female Knight. He only looked up for the briefest of moments from poring over the party’s account books at a corner of the table. “Those ruins are supposed to be empty, but accidents happen. I expect plenty of quests looking for adventurers to clean up any messes.”

“In other words, we can be the first to reach the finish line—we just need to pretend to be on a rescue mission!” said Scout Boy.

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” Heavy Warrior replied with a deep sigh. He had a feeling that if he didn’t rein Female Knight in, she might put on a helmet and try

to pass herself off as a novice. “How’s our money look to get us through the winter?” he asked the half-elf.

“We’ll have enough and to spare,” came the calm response. Novices might find finances tight, but experienced adventurers spent money like water. Delve enough ruins and dungeons and fight enough monsters, and you could find treasure chests containing all the money you could ever want. Though even these, as beginners, had complained of hardly having enough for accommodations each night or to purchase magical equipment.

“I would be more worried about losing our edge from leading an indolent life all winter,” the half-elf continued.

“Guess we don’t have a choice then,” Heavy Warrior said, grinning like a wild animal. “Maybe we’d better go make a little pocket change.” This earned a cheer from Female Knight (of course) as well as the younger boy and girl. After all, being involved with any kind of festivity was sure to be a fun adventure—but...

“Lucky them...” This murmur came from Club Fighter, sitting not far away with his chin in his hands. He’d become rather adept at his two-handed style, using his sword and his club simultaneously, such that people had finally stopped treating him like a rookie. But he was still far, far from the level of an expert. In other words, he and his party wouldn’t be able to participate in *any* capacity.

“Gee, ’twasn’t that long ago that I registered. Guess I could join in without kickin’ up too much of a fuss,” said Harefolk Hunter easily, and she chuckled. Her fur had turned pure white almost without the others realizing it.

“No fair,” Club Fighter grumbled.

“It *is* fair,” Supreme God’s Cleric said firmly, crossing her arms and raising an eyebrow. “It’s also a reminder that we don’t have time to spend playing around. We can’t be part of any winter festivities.”

“Er... Yeah, well... Yeah.” When she put it that way, there was nothing he could say.

Breaking out of one’s novice shell hardly meant one would immediately start raking in the dough—even if they were substantially better off than when they

had been living hand to mouth. These days they could afford a cot even for Club Fighter, not just the girls; and their diets were starting to grow more varied. Then again, the interest in food was partly thanks to their new companion, who would happily eat just about anything and declare it scrumptious.

One didn't have to be a harefolk to need food and drink in order to function. Club Fighter sure wished he could get his hands on a magic sword, though.

I don't really have any complaints about our equipment, he thought. *It's our health that really matters now.* There flashed through his mind a memory of his old friend's warmth—the warmth of a woman, despite her small frame. He cast himself prostrate on the table to try to shake off the thought. He'd never really noticed that warmth before, and it would be all over if he started now.

"How about y'all come to my place? My mom'd be happy to have y'both, I bet."

"I'd feel bad imposing on her," Supreme God's Cleric said. "Say, isn't there any game we can hunt in the winter?"

"Guess you could go after a wild boar or a deer. If they gotcha with their tusks or horns, it'd be over just like that, but that's how it goes, I guess."

"You sound awfully cavalier about it. Hmm...it's possible we could do a troll hunt."

"Are you kidding? It'd probably wind up eatin' *us*!" Over Club Fighter's head, the two girls were busy exchanging some very dangerous suggestions. He remembered a hunter in his own village who'd died after getting stabbed in the thigh by a boar. And he'd heard about villages attacked by trolls—those terrible, pure-white monsters.

A troll hunt. Trolls belonged in tunnels. Not human villages.

Club Fighter, absently seeking an escape from reality, mumbled to himself, "I'd sure like to take it nice and easy for a good five years or so..."

"Five years? You haven't even been adventuring that long!" Supreme God's Cleric retorted.

It was an all-around lively conversation.

It wasn't true, though, that none of these middle-ground adventurers—those who were neither untested amateurs nor experienced veterans—could have anything to do with the contest. At that very moment, at another table besides those of both Heavy Warrior and Club Fighter, a warlock was telling her party in a businesslike manner: “I won't be able to go on any adventures for a while.”

“Huh?!” demanded their leader, an ax wielder, blindsided by what seemed to be a fait accompli. “Why not?!”

“Well, 'cause I gotta make some goblins,” Warlock replied without missing a beat and without looking up from the spell book in front of her.

It pained her no end. She had no idea how they'd found out what kinds of spells she knew.

It has to be the government's fault. They'd squawked about secrets and confidentiality and not telling anyone, but then they'd let it slip—this was why she didn't have any truck with them. She thought they ought to try being the one who had to go around collecting all the ingredients. *Yeesh. For goodness' sake.*

Maybe it was the dark elf looks that threw them. They certainly attracted plenty of lecherous old men.

“Huh, you can do that sort of thing?” a clear voice inquired, interrupting Warlock's vitriolic thoughts about her hometown. She glanced over to see the elf woman—the one with very pale skin who'd recently joined their party—smiling at her. Elves were already so pretty—surely she didn't need to put on all that makeup.

“I haven't exactly been going out of my way to collect catalysts,” Warlock replied, annoyed by the smell of powder that wafted from the elf.

“What d'you want with summoning goblins anyway?” another party member, a monk, said.

Warlock could only manage a whisper: “It's not summoning them; it's *making* them. Although I suppose it's like calling forth a reproduction...”

Why bother explaining the niceties to them? They wouldn't understand. Frustrating, then, how they kept demanding her to do exactly that. Magic was

magic. Strange things happened. That was all the explanation they were going to get. Bunch of rationalists.

“Anyway, I don’t know,” Warlock continued brusquely. “I assume they’re enemies for the contest, most likely. It’ll sap a bit of my vitality, but it’ll make us some money.”

Making some money: That was what really mattered.

“Fair enough. I like money. These elves, they treat it like it’s no more special than a rock; I just don’t understand it.”

The elf woman pursed her lips and pouted that some people had no interest in anything but mithril. Warlock gave the elf a good glare. Was she even planning on hiding that powdery stench?

“Fine, whatever—point is, you won’t be able to go on any adventures, is that right?” their leader asked. And why didn’t he notice it? Warlock sighed deeply.

Somewhere in this world there were elves who flagellated their own backs morning and evening in the name of prayer to a god of pain. The Four-Cornered World was a big place, and the ambit of the gods was large. But still—didn’t that seem a bit much?

“Now, now, you’re the only one I’ve told about that.”

Warlock was determined to ignore the giggle and the breath that tickled her ear; they were too annoying to do otherwise. None of the party members had ever previously paid attention to the fact that on their adventures, Warlock was the odd woman out in their group; but ever since this elf woman had arrived, they’d found themselves divided into two genders. She was certainly grateful for that at times—but it also came with its annoyances. The elf was the first scout they’d had, though, ever since that rhea of theirs vanished somewhere. Compared with the prospect of being caught in a deadly trap, Warlock was willing to let the elf do her thing. Maybe Warlock should even make the first move to ensure the elf didn’t decide to leave the party? That would be a headache all its own, though...

“So in short, our spell caster will be behind the scenes on this occasion, yes?” said the monk, a man who’d never had to worry about money in his life, as he

noded to himself. “Then is this not, in effect, a summons from the gods for *us* to make money behind the scenes as we have the opportunity?”

“Yes!”

“That’s it!”

“Right...” Warlock was not pleased. She saw what this meant. She would have to be the one to introduce the party to the Guild and beg them to give her group some work. She would have to act her rank, like the kind of adventurer a Guild employee would want to deal with. All dressed up and polite.



The idea was enough to make her head spin, but she knew it would be pointless to object. Once her group got an idea into their collective head, they wouldn't be dissuaded—and it was true that they didn't have any money.

Warlock looked back down at her spell book, but she was acutely aware of the others watching her silently. So they thought this was settled? Yeah... It was probably settled.

Oh, for... I just... Arrgh!

§

“Bah, fine!” an adventurer shouted, shoving back her chair and heading for the reception desk. Priestess watched her from where she sat in the waiting area.

Actually, it wasn't quite accurate to say either that she sat or that she watched. She was continually standing up anxiously, pacing around, then sitting back down before repeating it all again. And she wasn't specifically looking at anything so much as simply allowing light and sound to reach her eyes and ears—she probably didn't even really hear the conversations.

She had bigger things on her mind.

“Urgh... Urgh... Urrrrghhh...” She seated her slim behind on the chair once more, restlessly, and fiddled with her golden hair. She'd been like this all morning—she wished she'd spent a little longer checking herself in the water's reflection. “I wonder if I look okay...”

“Oh, you're fine. You don't have to worry quite so much.” Inspector, the sigil of the Supreme God hanging around her neck, smiled gamely and answered the question for the umpteenth time. She may have served a different god, but she was just like Priestess in that she was working hard to move forward—she was just a little farther down the path. She wanted to see all these boys and girls work hard and grow strong. However, it was her policy not to particularly encourage or chastise anyone. If they asked for help, she would help them, but anything more struck her as meddling.

Anyway, when a person was entering on the middle ranks, it was high time she should be used to this sort of situation.

“The Temple of the Earth Mother in the capital asked for you personally. I get why you’d be nervous.”

“Of course...”

Still, Inspector thought (as if it had nothing to do with her), it was a bit much to thrust on her so suddenly. Word of their little event had somehow reached the capital, which had indicated that they would be sending an observer and that the person was to be shown suitable hospitality. And to show that hospitality, they’d picked this girl, as readily as if she’d had an arrow pointing over her head.

Inspector was used to these big-name visitors; receiving them was all in a day’s work for her. In fact, she sort of liked it—it got her out of doing paperwork for the duration—but maybe adventurers didn’t feel the same way. Between this and the talk of the dungeon exploration contest recently, Priestess must have been at risk of buckling under the pressure.

“You should be thrilled. This means they know your name all the way in the capital.”

“Yeah, that’s, uh, great... You don’t think it’s really Goblin Slayer that they recognize?”

It was less humility than simple fact to say that Priestess herself wasn’t all that important. Anyway, it was pretty typical for the warrior to be the most prominent member of a party, followed by the wizard, then the priest, and lastly the scout. Notwithstanding the good dark elf ranger of legend—or striders, who were basically as celebrated as warriors... Or a priest of great eminence whose name was known far and wide from the frontier to the capital.

“You adventured in the capital once, right?”

“Yes...”

“Well, maybe that’s when they found out about you,” Inspector said. In her view, though, it didn’t really matter what the reason was. They’d asked for Priestess, which meant her reputation wasn’t a bad one. Having one’s name widely known was the ultimate boon for an adventurer.

“The Trade God tells us: Seize every opportunity and don’t let go. Now an

opportunity's fallen into your lap—you'd sure better take it."

The next quest, the next job, the next adventure. Fighting and growing. Then pressing even farther ahead. Inspector clenched her fist for emphasis, but her lecture seemed a bit lost on Priestess.

"Are you embarrassed that you're famous?" she asked.

"Not really. It's more like...I'm not sure I can live up to their expectations yet." Priestess looked deeply uneasy, but then an awkward smile worked its way onto her face. "I'm trying my best to tell people *I can do it* when I know I can."

"That's what it comes down to, isn't it?" Self-confidence was so important. You couldn't get by on humility alone. On the other hand, it wouldn't do to become a preening diva, either; there was always a bigger fish. And when you didn't know about someone's circumstances, then arguing about whether their achievements were down to luck or ability was, well...

"People will say what they want. All you can do is work hard to help things turn out well."

"...It's tough, isn't it?" Priestess glanced in the direction of Heavy Warrior—no, Female Knight. Or was she looking at someone who wasn't there? Was she looking for Witch, perhaps, or even Goblin Slayer? "All the accomplished adventurers look so amazing to me. I can't help wondering if I could ever catch up with them."

"You've got it backward. They've all learned to *look* amazing." Inspector cackled. "It's just for show!"

As a Guild employee, she knew the stories behind the legends. How the renowned knight errant had nearly died on their very first adventure, how the bold cleric's sword had been melted, leaving her in tears. Her famous one-hit kill hadn't actually killed in one hit, leaving the party's scout to finish off the monster.

"Everyone's the same deep down inside. All of them."

Inspector realized this might have been the first time she'd had a conversation like this with Priestess. She'd talked to Priestess's friends—Guild Girl, Padfoot Waitress, High Elf Archer, the girl from the farm—but one-on-one

like this... Maybe it was simply another roll of the gods' dice.

In the Four-Cornered World, the dice could change people's wills and fates. Just like they might direct meetings and partings. That being the case, she wanted to do her best to build good relationships...

"Oh!" Inspector's thoughts were interrupted when Priestess looked up.

The bell over the door of the Adventurers Guild jingled, and two people came in. One was a nun, her healthy brown skin visible under her habit; she was laughing jovially and waving.

"Hullo there! Sorry for the wait. It's been so long since I've been to town—can't blame me for getting distracted!"

The woman's voice was as bright as the sun; Priestess smiled and got to her feet. "Oh, not at all...! Thank you for coming out today. Wait—you're the one they picked for a guide?"

"Mm-hmm. I've been itching to get out of there anyway. So boring. It was the perfect chance." And she had seized it, just like Inspector had been talking about. Priestess giggled.

Inspector, appraising the women's relationship as she observed the exchange, constrained herself to a polite bow. It would have been uncouth to break into their conversation, and the nun likewise only nodded.

"I've got to say I was surprised, though," she said. "The world seems so big—until it seems so small!" She played with a stray black curl. (Wasn't her wimple supposed to hold all her hair?)

"I'm afraid I'm not sure what you mean," Priestess replied, inclining her head.

"No worries, then," the nun said with a grin. "Anyway, guess I'd better start by introducing our esteemed visitor. Please welcome our friend from the temple in the capital..."

Priestess took a sharp breath and blinked. Inspector likewise exclaimed, "Hoh!"

"Hello! I'm here!"

The girl who peeked out from behind the nun was quite lovely—and the

spitting image of Priestess.

§

“Er, uh, yes, y-you’re here... Why are you h—?”

“Shh! Shh! Shhh!”

Before she could get the words out, Priestess found the girl practically jumping on her, pressing a finger to her lips. Feeling the softness of that body, seeing her own face so close to hers, Priestess immediately felt her cheeks flush.

“L-listen, I didn’t run away this time, and I’m not here just to have fun. I swear...!”

Priestess nodded emphatically at the girl’s—the king’s younger sister’s—declaration. It seemed like the only response that would get the other girl away from her—and allow her to breathe again.

“Er, uh...sorry. I mean... I apologize.” The girl backed away, and Priestess let out a relieved breath.

“B-but *how* did you get here? Did they really agree to it?”

“Well, it’s Temple business. I’m here as a priestess sent from the Temple of the Earth Mother.” The king’s younger sister coughed importantly and puffed out her ample chest, then gave a brief click of her tongue. “Although, *ahem*, it’s a secret from His Maj—I mean, from my brother that I’m here!”

“Ah.”

Well...

It would be hasty to take this for mere self-indulgence or a lack of remorse. Launching headlong into a situation without thinking about it and taking action only after thorough consideration of the circumstances were perhaps more alike than they seemed. A smile came to Priestess’s face to see this girl, who had been through such an awful experience, bounce back so quickly. She had to admit she felt some sympathy for the young lion who ran the country, but this was a good thing; she was sure of it.

“Huh, so you two know each other?” Sister Grape said, smiling as she

watched the girls giggle together. Maybe, for her, this really was just about staving off the boredom. Or maybe she was happy for this friend whom she regarded like a sister. More likely still, it was both at once that made her squint with happiness and say: “You really do look like sisters, standing side by side.”

“You think so?” Priestess asked.

“I sure don’t.” The king’s younger sister thought they were different in quite a number of ways. She and Priestess looked at each other quizzically.

Then again, it wasn’t unpleasant to be told they resembled each other.

Inspector interrupted the chatter with a delicate cough. “So, uh...”

Ah yes. Priestess quickly straightened up and faced the king’s younger sister properly. “So you’ve come from the Temple of the Earth Mother in the capital to observe our activities here—is that correct?”

“Er, yes. That’s right.” The girl nodded, then added, “Umm,” trying to decide how to explain. She nodded again. “There was that thing with spring being late, right? And after that, the trouble over the consecrated wine.”

Ah... Those adventures felt so long ago to Priestess, but they evoked a rush of nostalgia as well. Now that she thought about it, the year seemed to have passed in a hurry, but she’d done a great many things. She’d taken on the battle on the snowy mountain, taken much initiative in the events surrounding the wine, and then they’d all headed to the country in the east.

“And then there was the necromancer’s army recently.”

“Oh, yeah, that. I think the hero eventually took them down.”

The events of which the king’s younger sister and Inspector spoke were of utmost importance to the nation—and Priestess had been involved with them, however tangentially. *That kind of makes me feel like I’ve actually become a pretty serious adventurer...*

Heh, sure. She felt a touch of confidence well up within her. Although she reminded herself she mustn’t become conceited. Priestess puffed out her chest just a little—Sister Grape noticed and shook her head. “Better be careful,” the nun cautioned.

“We were worried that something else might happen over the winter—and that’s why I’m here!” said the king’s younger sister before admitting shyly that she wouldn’t necessarily be able to do anything about it simply by being present and observing.

That’s true enough, Priestess thought. A single priest alone was unlikely to sway matters. But it felt very different from having no one come at all.

And for the one who showed up to be this girl, of all people. She spoke only in her capacity as a priestess, yet she was, in the end, the first princess—the younger sister of the ruling monarch. There could have been no better way for the authorities to make it clear that they weren’t taking this situation lightly. Namely, the situation on the western frontier—Priestess saw she would need to rise to the occasion, herself.

“Um, all right, then. Shall I show you around?” she suggested hesitantly.

“Good idea!” the king’s younger sister chirped. “There are so many things I want to see. So, uh, you’re doing a dungeon exploration contest in some old ruins, right?”

“Yes, ma’am. The specifics are in this report.” Inspector politely handed the princess the sheaf of parchment she’d been holding. “Might it not be best to study the details with your own eyes?”

“Yeah, good idea. You definitely have to see these things for yourself.” The girl hugged the papers to her chest, sounding like she sincerely believed what she was saying. It was so easy to make baseless pronouncements when you didn’t know what you were talking about—and to go charging in because you didn’t know what you were dealing with. She’d learned well the lesson that seeing and studying something for oneself made all the difference in the world.

“All right, I’ll never hear the end of it if I don’t get back. It looks like you ladies can handle things.” Sister Grape, who had been quietly listening to the conversation, was suddenly waving good-bye.

True enough. Inspector nodded as well. The girls seemed to be good friends—this was going to be fine. “Very well,” she said, “perhaps you could show us to the...” She thought for a moment, trying to pick the right word, then decided that anything was fine so long as it got the point across. “...the venue?”

“Yes, of course,” Priestess said with a smile and a nod. “Just follow me!”

§

It's downright cruel...

That's what Guild Girl was thinking as she hefted the metal head covering and tied the strap under her chin. The ancient ruins were illuminated only by the orange flicker of a small flame. The stone walls and pillars were decorated with bizarre patterns and carvings or, in some places, scenes that appeared to illustrate stories. Their significance had been long lost to time; no living human knew what they meant. In the dancing shadows cast by the light, they almost seemed alive.

I've heard such things actually exist in the underground cities built by the dwarves. Supposedly, images of miners and smiths “worked” in the carvings, while engravings above gates bowed to visitors. She herself had never been to the famous dwarven cities, though; she only knew by hearsay. Although she *had* once been to an elvish city with him and his friends...

“Humans have what's called a dominant eye. Left or right: Inevitably, one of them is stronger than the other,” Goblin Slayer explained, completely ignoring the fact that he was interrupting Guild Girl's thoughts. He was practically crawling on the ground, making chalk marks in various places. Guidelines for where to position the goblins in the dungeon.

He had a lantern in one hand—most unusual for him—and was watching his surroundings vigilantly as he made these preparations.

Guild Girl trotted after him, trying to take care not to stumble or fall.

“For most people, it is the right hand and eye that are dominant. In other words, it's harder to fight a foe to the left.”

“Th-that makes sense...I think?” The entire subject seemed rather brutal to her.

Obviously, that was nothing new, and this was, after all, part of her job. And goblins, goblins, goblins, goblins, goblins was how it went every time with him.

B-besides, I don't usually get to spend so much time talking with him, so this

has its upsides...! The thought dispelled her flash of disgust. “It’s true. I know most adventurers... They seem to wield their weapons in their right hands.”

“Which is also where most magicians hold their staves, and it’s the hand with which they aim at their targets. It’s difficult to cast spells with the left hand.” Some people did carry a shield on the left, so it wasn’t completely useless. With this final comment, Goblin Slayer stood up, seemingly having finished making his marks. “Some people use the left-handed search, as well. A scout with a free left hand should be the first to be attacked.”



“Left-handed— Oh!” Guild Girl hopped over some debris, nodding. Seeing that he was kind enough to stop and wait for her made her steps lighter. “You mean finding their way along by keeping their left hand on the wall.” She knew about that.

Games involving mazes were popular among the nobility, even if those mazes weren’t as serious as this one—being not real ruins. Hedges might be grown in a garden, manicured by a gardener, and shaped into a maze to be enjoyed at tea parties. Guild Girl had experienced such things on several occasions back when she was still living with her family.

“But I thought that didn’t work if the exit happened to be along a different wall...”

“True, the method fails if there is a cloister or the like. But I don’t believe our participants will be experienced enough to realize that.”

In other words, they would simply put their hands on the wall and trust that they’d eventually reach the center of the maze. That would make them easy to draw in, he observed. “Perhaps we could put the trip for some trap along the left wall. Even a shield might trip it.”

“...I believe I said to take it easy on them.”

“I believe I am.” Goblin Slayer nodded at her. “First, we wear them down with traps. When they’re tired enough that they’re no longer keeping close watch, we draw them toward the center of the maze and launch the attack.”

This wasn’t the first time he had mentioned this plan, and Guild Girl marveled at his capacity for tormenting adventurers. Then again, adventures could indeed be torturous. They didn’t always follow a simple script: fun, easy, guaranteed wins, plenty of loot. Unexpected things happened, difficulties arose, and sometimes after all the struggle, the rewards were minimal. It wasn’t even uncommon for adventurers to risk life and limb in their endeavors.

Nor were there any promises of success; sometimes you failed. Sometimes you failed even if you didn’t do anything wrong. Say, for example, you discovered the entrance to a cave and carelessly exclaimed “Yahoo!” only to be killed in the resulting landslide. It might sound comical, but it was no joke. It had

actually happened—it was just a particularly striking case of something perfectly common. Guild employees heard their fill of such stories...

But it's precisely because there is fun and fulfillment that adventurers keep on doing what they do, Guild Girl thought.

"There are also no promises that one will constantly be able to get back to town or take breaks whenever they need to," said Goblin Slayer.

She let her thoughts drift as she followed his armored form. Was this how *he* had learned about adventuring? She was sure that if she asked, he'd respond that he'd been taught goblin hunting. A predictable answer—but such a sad one. He was perhaps the only person who felt that all he knew was goblins.

"Goblin Slayer..."

"Hrm?"

"Is this how you were taught?"

In the end, her question was as quiet as an exhale, fading into the dark.

It was a moment before he answered. He wasn't ignoring her—just thinking. Guild Girl knew him well enough to understand that much.

"...How did my sister teach me to hunt?" he said at length. "That was one of the questions my teacher asked me in the cave." Slowly but surely, he continued: "If I didn't respond fast enough, he'd send a snowball flying at me."

"Wow... So I guess he wouldn't have been happy with that pause just now." Guild Girl giggled at her own naughtiness.

"Hrm," Goblin Slayer grunted, then said, "Perhaps not." Guild Girl found that funny somehow, her laughter ringing out like a bell. In her mind's eye, the young version of him was still wearing armor and a helmet for some reason, and the thought of him engaged in a snowball fight was simply too cute.

"Sounds like your master could be harsh."

"Yes. He was a harsh person."

The immediacy of the answer made Guild Girl laugh again. *He*, though, didn't seem to pay it much mind.

“But he taught me many things. How to swim, for example... Truly, a great deal.” There was a brief whisper: “Even though he had no obligation to do so.”

“I see,” Guild Girl replied gently. She could surmise what his background had been. She wouldn’t say she *knew*; she’d never asked him directly about it. You didn’t have to know everything about a person to have feelings for them. It was precisely his willingness to talk to her like this that made her so happy.

“Did he teach you how to fight?”

In the old stories, the heroes were always taught all kinds of powerful techniques at a young age by some legendary master. Secret sword techniques, killing strokes, powerful blocks, moves that weren’t to be shared with anyone for any reason—there was a wide variety. Some of the stories were patently ridiculous: the ability to jump over sword strokes or cause someone to explode just by touching them, for example.

Then again, I hear the elvish heroes really were capable of jumping over swords. So maybe it was possible to kill an opponent with one finger, too.

“Not to speak of,” Goblin Slayer replied, laconic as usual. He had crouched down again and was making more chalk marks. This time on the right.

Maybe because otherwise they’d come to anticipate attacks from the left, Guild Girl thought. She was pretty confident in this guess, so she decided not to ask him about it. Other things were more important.

“Someone else taught me where a goblin’s vital points were.” He didn’t stop working even as he talked.

Guild Girl walked up beside Goblin Slayer, who was still squatting on the ground, and held the lantern up for him. The helmet moved ever so slightly; she could tell that it was nodding up and down. Even that slight gesture of thanks—barely enough to count as appreciation—warmed her heart.

“You knew her, I believe.”

“Oh, her.” Yes, Guild Girl knew her. An eccentric wizard who’d lived on the edge of town. They hadn’t talked often, but the woman had left a deep impression on her. She’d disappeared at some point, though. “I heard in passing that she left on some sort of journey.”

“I doubt she’ll come back.”

“Doesn’t that make you feel...sad or anything?”

“I’m not sure.” Goblin Slayer’s work, of course, still didn’t stop. As soon as he’d finished with the chalk, he stood up. “I don’t think we were close enough for that.”

“...I feel the same way.”

Something small—barely enough. It was how she, too, felt about the image of that wizard. How many people had known her and how many remembered her were trivial questions. What mattered was that he and she shared this memory; they had it in common. Perhaps he had many more such points of commonality with the girl on the farm, but for Guild Girl, this was a precious treasure.

The farm girl probably remembers that woman, too. Guild Girl was all too aware that she wasn’t unique in this regard. He, after all, was Goblin Slayer. When he wasn’t off hunting goblins, he went home to that farm. He visited the Adventurers Guild only in the moments in between the farm and the hunt.

In other words, this very moment is special. The thought made her glad that this was her job, even as it left her feeling slightly embarrassed. *Bad girl—I have to focus on my work.* It hadn’t been anything inappropriate. No abuse of power. So it was fine. She was fairly sure.

Preoccupied with remonstrating with herself, she was caught unawares by his next word:

“However...”

Nonetheless, she was able to respond smoothly and fluently. “Yes, what is it?”

“Are you sure I’m enough?”

“More than sure.” Guild Girl smiled. It was a little late for him to be worrying about that. *If the student lacks confidence, maybe they’re only imitating their teacher... Ha.* Amusingly, their weaknesses were as similar as their strengths. Still, though... *I guess this must all be new to him—everything that doesn’t have to do with goblin hunting.* She placed a finger to her lips thoughtfully: So in that respect, he was a novice himself.

Then, too, it wasn't as if she had any special expertise hosting an event like this. Guild Girl, spotting an appropriately shaped bit of rubble, sat down by his feet. She hoped the flickering lantern light might make her a little bit more attractive. "You've certainly shown yourself capable of looking after and helping out newcomers, haven't you?"

"Hrm." From the helmet looming in the darkness, there was only a grunt. "If that's your criterion...", he began, "...then perhaps that heavy warrior's party would be better."

Guild Girl nodded; they were a possibility. She saw where he was coming from. But... "They're maybe just a bit overprotective," she said, holding up a finger and waving it pointedly, though careful not to sound like she was tearing them down. Notwithstanding that the kids had lied about their ages, Heavy Warrior's party members were very successfully bringing up two young adventurers. The two kids in question (the rhea druid was actually the older of the pair, but rheas always looked a bit like children) would certainly become good adventurers.

That wasn't the real point, though.

"They might be good, but adventures aren't always full of nice things."

"I see."

"Er, not to make it sound like we're out to traumatize our participants!" Guild Girl was quick to add, trying to make herself look authoritative. She shouldn't mix personal and professional matters. She kept telling herself that, trying to adopt a suitably businesslike demeanor. This was a special moment for her, true—but she was also on the job. "We can't be doing that. We absolutely can't!"

"Is that so?"

"It certainly is."

"This is difficult," he murmured, and even his body language was like that of a child given a hard problem to solve by their teacher. He crossed his arms, grunted, and then fell into a sullen silence. Such body language might also have appeared to forestall any further conversation, but Guild Girl knew that he was simply thinking. She was sure that farm girl would have understood, too. As well

as the people he adventured with.

And there's where I'm not so unique...

The thought made her both happy and sad at once. He must lapse into thoughts like this sometimes down in a dungeon or in a cave. Guild Girl, though, never had the opportunity to see him standing like this in the lantern light. Hence, she placed her elbows on her knees, a smile coming over her face. "So adventures aren't fun, then?"

"I can see that."

"...I thought so."

After all, he had been on so many of them by now. He'd slain that ogre in the old ruins, fought the nameless monster in the sewers, and even tried himself against the infamous Dungeon of the Dead. It was only difficult to get the details from him because he couldn't or wouldn't explain clearly about anything except goblins. But recently he'd been on a quest that needed no elaborate explication. Because he said he'd—

"When you beat that dragon, how did it feel?" Guild Girl rested her chin on her knees, her question teasing. That's right: a dragon. A red dragon. A creature every aspiring adventurer dreamed of at least once in their lives. Even the man they called Goblin Slayer must have known about dragons.

"We didn't 'beat' it," he said brusquely, a response that both annoyed her and yet brought a smile to her face. "We simply put it to sleep and escaped."

"I know, I know. You just put it to sleep. And?"

"I believe I made a full report."

"Oh, come on," Guild Girl said, pouting. "We're on a little break, here."

"Hmm..." He sat down where he was, though Guild Girl doubted it was because she had told him to. The fact that he still never let his hands stray too far from his weapons and shield—was that the way adventurers worked or simply the way *he* worked?

It must have been a common sight on adventures, him like this—even sitting down. Guild Girl considered the chance to see him this way to be a perk of this

assignment.

“So?” she said with a giggle. She thought she might be able to bring the two conversations together. “What were the hunting methods your older sister taught you?”

“To be precise, they came from our father,” he said. “How to throw a spear, for instance. There’s a trick involving a string that’s surprisingly—”

It was a small conversation. An unimportant exchange. But that was what made her happiest of all.

Now, she thought, the next question is...

...how to find an excuse to bring out the packed lunches in her bag.

§

“...And that’s pretty much the gist of what they’re saying.”

“Gods, you and those ears are dangerous.”

“Nothing I can do about it. Not my fault elves have long ears!”

“Yeah, sure...”

Several areas away, Dwarf Shaman was pulling up paving stones and frowning. He wanted to tease the archer about whether she wasn’t too old to be making excuses like that, but unfortunately for him, the high elves considered two thousand years to be still rather young.

“So what kind of trap are you setting?” High Elf Archer asked.

“Oh, just a simple device.” On the underside of the stone, he’d wedged a classic dwarven trap: a small bit of wood wound with string. When he turned the stone right side up again, it sat almost flush with the wall, where there were two holes at the perfect height.

“Say, Scaly. How’s it going on your side?”

“I have the string quite taut!”

Only when the voice came from beyond the wall did High Elf Archer realize Lizard Priest had worked his way around to the other side. It was such fun exploring these ruins—and not just these ones. She would never say so aloud

(the dwarf would never let her hear the end of it), but elves didn't know much about architecture.

So that's why dwarves try to shave down stones and stand atop them, she thought. Even if, she recalled, her elders in the forest had told her there was no point to it.

Truth be told, though, even she thought the ability to create a brand-new device like this on short order was genuinely impressive. "What exactly does it do?" she asked.

"Stand here and look in the hole," Dwarf Shaman instructed, moving over for her. "But not too close."

"What, here? Wonder if there's some treasure in it..."

It really looked like there might be something on the other side of the wall—but, well...

High Elf Archer hopped onto the paving stone and crouched down so she was about human height.

...?

She blinked her pretty eyes. All she could see on the other side was the same rotten dungeon, nothing very treasure-y at all. "I don't see anything."

"Bah...", Dwarf Shaman said, annoyed. He let out a sigh. "You've gotta step on the floor. *Step* on it."

With a flick of her ears and a little shout, High Elf Archer gave the floor a good kick. There was a clattering sound, and a wooden stick popped out of the hole. The archer jumped backward out of the way with a grace only a high elf could muster, then frowned. "Geez, that's underhanded. This is why no one likes dwarves..."

"Get distracted by the chance of treasure and you're taking a risk." Dwarf Shaman grinned nastily and stroked his beard as High Elf Archer tapped on the wooden pole. It was blunt and moved slowly enough that it wasn't too dangerous, but if it were a spike or a sword, it could be a real threat.

"Think we need it to be a mite more responsive," Dwarf Shaman went on.

“Too gentle and they won’t learn their lesson.”

“Yeah, too gentle for a *dwarf*!”

“And it’s that all-mist diet that makes you such an anvil.”

How rude! The elf put her ears back and offered a few choice (but still remarkably elegant) words. Indeed, to those untutored in the elvish language, it might have sounded like a song, but her sister or brother-in-law would have blushed to hear her.

Dwarf Shaman, though, shrugged off this stream of un-elvish-princess-like language. He replied with a short burst of dwarvish, figuring she wouldn’t understand, but he was rewarded with a howl from the archer.

“It seems it’s working quite well,” Lizard Priest offered, breaking into the characteristic quarrel. He came back from the area on the other side of the wall, where his thick fingers and claws had been helping to set the trap. High Elf Archer was frankly impressed that he’d managed such fine motions with those hands. “Well,” he said, “I’m not so *very* good at it.” He must have noticed her looking at him. He rolled his eyes and bared his fangs in a smile. “War games in my jungle always involve a simple trap or two. This idea, as well, came from Milord Goblin Slayer?”

“Nah. The man’s only interested in traps like goblins might set.” Dwarf Shaman then proclaimed, “*This one was mine*,” gently tapping his belly. “Goblins or no goblins, I admit this feels like the sorta thing a troll in a tunnel might come up with, though.”

High Elf Archer giggled. Just when he thought she was going to make another crack about the underhandedness of it, she said earnestly, “That’s true. It’s more fun leaving tricks all around the dungeon anyway.” She lamented that Orcbolg paid no mind to such things. It was hard to blame him; goblins could use simple traps if they were taught, but otherwise they wouldn’t. That eccentric adventurer had a good deal of knowledge; he just used it in strange ways. Thankfully, he seemed to realize it...

Or does that make it worse?

Any man who relied on that knowledge to insist he was right about everything

would have been chased out of his party long ago.

The two men present at the moment watched the giggling elf doubtfully, but she fluttered a hand at them. “It’s nothing. So, uh, is that it?”

“Hardly. There’s some visitor coming from the capital to inspect our work,” Dwarf Shaman said, remembering what Priestess had told him that morning. To an elf, it must have been hardly an eyeblink ago.

No... Come to think of it, she was asleep then, wasn’t she? He glared at her from under his bushy eyebrows. “...So behave yerself.”

“Look who’s talking. It won’t be a problem for me; I’m not a *dwarf*.”

“You elves were the ones who threw our royal family in prison!”

“Yeah, for being rude *dwarves*.” High Elf Archer ignored an angry retort from Dwarf Shaman, instead sniffing the air like a cat. “Anyway, I wonder what kind of ruins these are,” she added.

“I must say, I can’t imagine,” Lizard Priest said, brushing the wall gently with his scaled hand. A bit of the stone came away, weakened by sheer age. Perhaps something had been painted on the wall once, but whatever it had been was no longer discernible. “I don’t believe this was any kind of fortress...”

“You want my opinion—it wasn’t a temple, neither.” Dwarf Shaman took a swig of wine, then picked up a pinch of the debris from the wall and studied it. Even in the hands of a dwarf, accustomed to handling stone, the debris scattered into dust at his touch. “Looks like it was constructed in a hurry—but, well, old battlefields are rife around these parts.”

“That just means we don’t know *anything* about it!”

“I think we know it doesn’t date from the Age of the Gods.” Dwarf Shaman’s tone remained serious despite High Elf Archer’s interjection. He hated to say anything untrue in his professional capacity.

“Huh... From the Age of Magic, then?”

“Maybe.”

After the battles of the gods and before the days of the adventurers was an era known as the Age of Magic. It referred to a time when the gods, seeing the

pleasure of adventuring, withdrew from the Four-Cornered World and set themselves up at the table of the stars. Terrible spells flew every which way, magic overwrote all worldly logic, and the entire board was thrown asunder.

The land was exhausted with the battles of great wizards who wielded even greater spells. Even the gods themselves couldn't stop their games of cards. After all, once they had determined to respect people's free will, they could no longer control that which was done freely.

The Age of Magic came to an end when the wizards eventually left—became planeswalkers and departed the Four-Cornered World one by one. It was the long—yet short—twilight before adventuring began. A winter age when all those who were not wizards struggled to survive.

Perhaps the oldest dragons and the elves who had endured the Age of the Gods remembered...

"But it was way, way before I was born. It's a mystery... A real enigma."

"I'll bet you can remember the day you were born."

"Oh, hardly." *Hmph*, High Elf Archer sniffed.

The sound amused Lizard Priest, who bared his fangs. "If I myself had been alive at the time, perhaps I would have been one of those great wizards."

"Then you would have been trying to leave the board instead of becoming a naga."

"Oh, by no means. That is merely one more step on the path to becoming a great naga." To become a planeswalker was, after all, to effectively have an eternity until one's life wasted away. "And even as a great wizard, I think I would eventually have encountered you, Milady Ranger."

"A great wizard who loves cheese, right?" High Elf Archer smirked, imagining a wizard playing his cards to produce cheese. Then, however, her long ears twitched.

"S-sorry...!" There came a tapping: footsteps and hard breathing. Two of each.

"You're finally here," High Elf Archer said.

"Nice," Dwarf Shaman said, scowling at her. "Already made your first rude

comment.”

“Nothing rude about that.”

When the figures coming from the distant entrance became clear, High Elf Archer blinked. For she saw an outfit she recognized and a face she recognized—but she saw two of each.

Hmm... But maybe one of them walks a little heavier than the other?

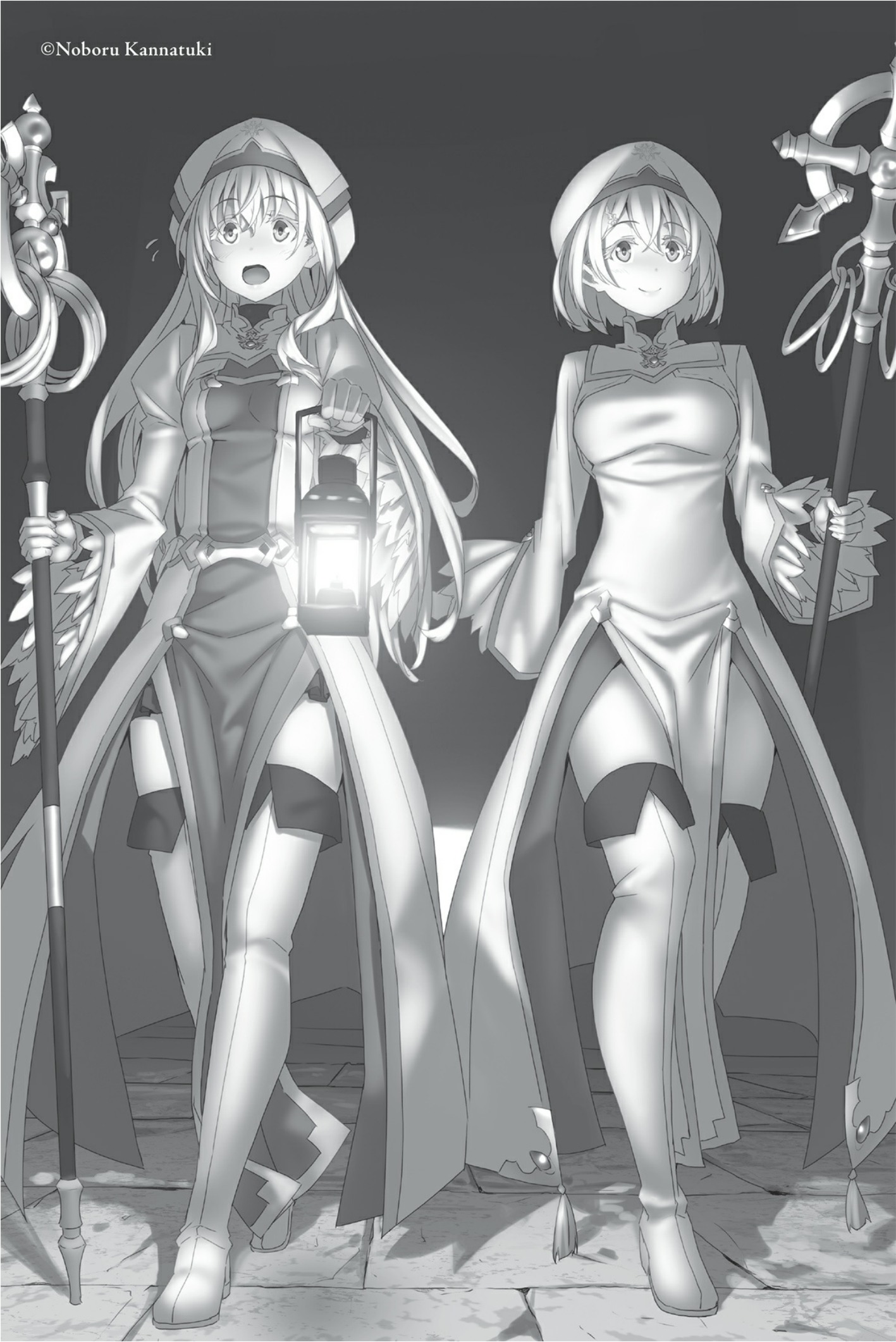
Ah, no. That was it: When she remembered, her lips curved up soundlessly, and her cheeks softened into a smile. The girl they’d rescued from the Dungeon of the Dead had become a fine priestess and was here on her own two feet.

“I owe you so much for that!” were the first words out of the girl’s mouth as she bowed to them, smiling brightly. “Please allow me to, *ahem*, observe, uh, everything on this occasion!”

“I think we’re just setting up traps... Uh, right?” Priestess asked, clearly wanting to make sure she had all her ducks in a row.

High Elf Archer’s ears stood up. “That’s right. Maybe our guest could start by inspecting that hole over there.”

“This one here?”



Before Dwarf Shaman could call out, the new girl—the king’s younger sister—had trotted over like a tiny bird. Her eyes sparkled with curiosity as she peered into the gap...

“Eeek!” she cried and fell on her behind to cackling laughter from the elf. Dwarf Shaman scowled again and tried to jab her in the side, but she dodged him artfully—and triumphantly.

No, no, this didn’t even count as being rude.

§

As the festival drew closer, the town’s nights grew busier. It might not be as impressive as the water town, but as far as the western frontier went, this town was the place to be. The crowds, which had thinned out as winter approached, began to swell again, helping the streets feel warm figuratively if not literally.

Heavy Warrior’s hulking form could be seen among the crowd, albeit without his broadsword or armor. He walked carefully, so as not to run into anyone. That would be downright uncouth. Neither, though, did he walk as if he were in a dungeon looking for traps. Today was a day off. In other words, he was enjoying the anticipation of the festival just like anyone else.

There was still a while to go, of course. There were no shops set up and all too few decorations. Still, these moments as anticipation built in the air had a pleasure all their own.

Heavy Warrior worked his way through the easygoing bustle until he found the bar he was looking for. He hadn’t been to the Dear Friend’s Ax that many times, but it was where he went at moments like this. He pushed open the door, soft orange light filling his vision, the burble and hum of the place greeting his ears. The bar was doing brisk business, and setting foot inside was like stepping into another world.

“My friends should already be here,” Heavy Warrior said to the harefolk waitress who came to greet him. He hardly even had to search for them: They, like he, always stood out.

There, over at the round table.

“Hey. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“All good.”

“It’s not a problem.”

Spearman waved at him. He looked handsome as usual but didn’t have his enchanted spear with him; instead, he carried only a sword at his hip.

Guess it’d be a little funny to be here in full gear...

Unless, of course, you were tonight’s host, Heavy Warrior’s eccentric friend in the grimy leather armor and metal helmet.

Heavy Warrior sat down, the chair creaking under him; the table was already laden with food and drink. They’d started without him. Heavy Warrior, though, saw no reason to complain. “Sure you don’t need to head straight back home tonight?”

“Home,” the helmeted man repeated clumsily, then shook his head. “I’ve spoken with them. No problems.”

“Yeah? Fine, then.” Heavy Warrior called over a waitress—this time it was a well-endowed centaur—and asked for wine and meat. How could you have a good conversation without victuals?

As the waitress walked away (*clop, clop, clop*), Heavy Warrior settled into his chair.

Spearman grinned at him. “Her butt?”

“Jackass.” His friend was a capable warrior, but he had a flippant side as well. Some women liked that and others didn’t, but overall, there were probably more of the former than the latter. It wasn’t an issue of good versus bad; Heavy Warrior just wasn’t cut out to live that way. Sweeping his spear this way and that, a beautiful woman on his arm, and ahead of him some ancient ruins or a legendary monster. The bards’ songs didn’t lie. Surely some became adventurers, inspired by their example.

And...maybe mine, too?

Not to be immodest, but Heavy Warrior had heard the occasional troubadour sing a song about him. Although it had been some nonsense about a cursed

warrior in jet-black armor making havoc. Female Knight had made a range of comical faces at that, but he remembered it fondly. Thinking back on it, it had been a powerfully moving experience the first time they'd heard someone sing a song about their own party. Some people might have sneered at the song or walked by without paying it any mind, but so what? Heavy Warrior, he'd had the thought that maybe now his adventures would be told ten or even a hundred years later.

The man sitting in impenetrable silence across from him—probably waiting for Heavy Warrior's food to arrive—was the same. Goblin Slayer, the brave warrior of the frontier. As his nickname suggested, even in the songs, he hunted goblins. Albeit the lines about him wielding a truesilver sword were pure comedy.

His high elf companion, though—she'd been bragging that they'd run into a red dragon out in the desert. Heavy Warrior had tried to wheedle Goblin Slayer into telling him about his "dragon-slaying" adventure, but all he got out of the guy was that he had not, in fact, slain it.

He's the most conspicuous of any of us...

Three men, three different ways of life. They each had their own path to walk, but it was undoubtedly Spearman who had made himself the most famous. Years ago, Heavy Warrior might have been jealous of that or felt a rush of competitiveness or hostility at the thought—but not now. He knew now that no matter what other people did, it was up to him to forge his own legend. Even if Spearman were to fall from grace or be completely anonymous, it would have no effect whatsoever on Heavy Warrior's achievements.

That indeed was one of the great strengths of Goblin Slayer, who just quietly addressed whatever was in front of him, one thing at a time. Call it virtue, if you wanted. But not caring in the slightest about what other people thought—that was what had shaped the man who sat before them now.

"You know, you could at least stand to take your armor off when you're in town," Heavy Warrior said.

"No, I could not." The usual annoyingly brusque answer. An exasperated smile crossed Heavy Warrior's face, but Spearman frowned.

“Listen, you’re a Silver, too. Get yourself some, y’know, magic items or something!”

“I have several.”

“I mean ones people can *see*! And they need to be useful. People are watching, you know.”

“I was told something similar before.”

“And you didn’t *do* anything about it! That means you’re not listening.”

“Hmm...”

Spearman and Goblin Slayer argued back and forth—well, really, only one of them was arguing. Every adventurer had their own way of doing things, so what was it to Spearman?

He just likes to butt in, Heavy Warrior thought. Happily, it was at that moment when a mug and a bubbling dish were set down before him. “...Ooh, food’s here.”

They gave a hearty toast with their mugs, and each took a good gulp of alcohol. When it was chilly outside and warm inside, a nice cold beer was all the more tasty. Then again, alcohol and food were always tasty.

“So what are we here for, Goblin Slayer?” Heavy Warrior asked.

“You’re not gonna ask us to hunt goblins again, are you?” Spearman said with a sniff. “If that’s what you want, I’m too busy.”

“Mm,” Goblin Slayer replied, shaking his helmeted head from side to side. “No, that’s not it.”

“Seriously?” Spearman asked.

“I want you to accompany me in a tabletop game,” the cheaply equipped adventurer said, and then he produced a partitioning screen and a roll of parchment and put them on the table. On the other side of the screen, they could see what appeared to be maps, playing pieces, and dice.

“Huh,” Heavy Warrior said, ignoring the way Spearman shot him a look of wonderment. “Is this about that dungeon exploration contest?”

“That’s right.” The helmet moved again, up and down this time. Goblin Slayer informed them brusquely that this was to be a test. “I’ve arranged the traps and monsters...the goblins...but I want to see if they’ll work while there’s still time to adjust things.”

“Aw, you’ve got our receptionist girl to give you all the feedback you need. Right from her own mouth. Her own sweet, beautiful mouth!” Spearman sounded like he could hardly believe it himself. He was all over Goblin Slayer, his eyes growing a little wild.

“Save the drunken tirades,” Heavy Warrior said.

“I ain’t drunk!” Spearman howled. “I’m *mad*, dammit!”

“Oh yeah?”

“Is that so?” Heavy Warrior more or less brushed Spearman off, but Goblin Slayer appeared to take him quite seriously. “But ultimately I’m the one who decides what to do. As such, the responsibility falls on me.”

“...Tch!” Spearman rested his elbows rudely on the table and clicked his tongue.

One of Goblin Slayer’s virtues was that he was unwilling to foist responsibility on anyone else, least of all a woman. It might seem condescending to praise him too openly, but needling him about it would only keep them from getting anywhere. Heavy Warrior resolved to remember it as something to tease him about later and took a big gulp of his beer. “Point is, you want to play a game. Fine by me.”

“.....Yeah, I got no objection.” Spearman managed to at least nod.

“I see,” Goblin Slayer said, letting out a breath. Apparently even he could get nervous. Heavy Warrior raised one eyebrow ever so slightly and reached over.

“Hand me one of those Adventure Sheets, then. Gotta gin up an adventurer.”

“Right.”

This must have been why he’d chosen a relatively large table. The three adventurers slid their meals aside.

Then there was the bustle. Someone trying to eavesdrop for details of the

contest wouldn't be likely to pick much up over the noise. If they'd set up shop in a corner of the Adventurers Guild to do their test, it would probably have just attracted attention. But this was...

Practically runner-esque. Maybe Goblin Slayer should try an urban adventure every once in a while. Heavy Warrior felt the corners of his mouth lift into a smile. The man would no doubt say he wasn't cut out for it.

Now, how's this gonna go? It had been a long time since he'd last played a tabletop game. *I'll have to keep my wits about me.*

There were four basic classes: warrior, scout, priest, and wizard, along with a variety of other skills and jobs the world had to offer. You had to think about the overall composition of your party when picking a class. Especially today, when the party was only the two of them. It would depend somewhat on what kind of adventurer his partner came up with, but he suspected a spell user or scout would be necessary...

So maybe a scout—or a priest who's a disciple of the Trade God. Or no...

Maybe a rogue who could use magic, like the famous Gray Mouser. An excellent example to follow. Trying to dream up a self who wasn't him was at once agonizing and thrilling. They could be a different race, have different abilities. They could be a different gender or age—but like him, they would still be an adventurer.

In the seat next to his, Spearman seemed to be enjoying himself as well, for he added: "Since we're doin' this, maybe I'll try a dwarf...scout."

"Hey, now," Heavy Warrior said with a grin. "Do those really go together?"

There were probably more disadvantages than advantages in a dwarf scout. Dwarves weren't known for their nimble fingers or for being light on their feet.

Spearman, though, simply replied, "Jerk. Nobody said only the perfect need apply to be adventurers."

"Sure, fair enough." Spearman was absolutely right, and Heavy Warrior accepted his remark earnestly. It was true, after all. Advantage and disadvantage, suited and not suited to a particular pursuit—those were based on other people's standards. Who would let something as trivial as that

determine whether or not they could be an adventurer?

“Spell user, scout, front row all filled, fireballs, miracles. A perfect party with all the fixings—and it only exists on paper.”

“You said it.” While Spearman scratched away with his stylus on the parchment sheet, Heavy Warrior lapsed into thought.

So what do I want to be?

It could be anything he wanted. Well, all right then.

He leaned over the table, grabbing a handful of dice, and as he rolled to determine his birth and whatnot, he said, “I’m gonna be an elf fighter. Spinnin’ and shinin’.”

“...That’s what I’m hearing, but it ain’t what I’m seeing.”

“A guy can decide how strong he wants to be, right?”

This time it was Spearman who said, “That’s true,” and nodded.

Heavy Warrior smiled, satisfied, and made some notes with his stylus, then looked at the man on the other side of the partition. “Say, Goblin Slayer. This dungeon isn’t gonna kill us if we don’t have a spell user or a scout, is it?”

“I don’t know.” This was the man who wouldn’t say a word about their stats. It seemed he was speaking the truth: He appeared to be thinking very hard about what might be coming. “That’s why I want us to try it out.”

“All right, works for me.” If he was going to ask sincerely for their help, then they would sincerely help him.

It took almost no time at all for these experienced adventurers to fill out their Adventure Sheets.

“Today is a good day to get wiped clean off the map,” Spearman, the first to finish writing, said with a furrowed brow. “I can guarantee any dungeon of yours is gonna be one brutal affair.”

“Well, try, try again. Maybe he’s been nicer than you’re assuming, and we’ll just waltz right to the end—you never know, right?”

This was a test session, after all. They would need to approach it with a

number of different party makeups. But there was one thing above all others they would need to be careful of. Heavy Warrior looked at his completed sheet in satisfaction and jabbed Spearman with his elbow. "Try to act like a novice, eh?"

"I'm not stopping to swing a damn ten-foot pole around every step." Spearman harrumphed. Then he picked up the dice. "Okay, game on. You ready, Goblin Slayer? No fair making the monsters act, you know, funny."

"I intend to make them act like goblins."

"Can't trust this guy..."

Heavy Warrior laughed out loud at the exchange, then took a swig of beer and a mouthful of boiled potato. "Okay, brothers, let's do this."



“We’re different races. We’re cousins at best.”

Cousins they might have been, but they were brothers-in-arms as they prepared to take on the dungeon exploration contest. It was going to be tough, but Heavy Warrior was enjoying himself. This was just the thing before a celebration.



The workshop boss drowsed at the counter with his chin in his hands. His eyes drifted open at a slight noise.

Now, this won't do. Maybe I'm feeling my age.

Maybe it was a thief, heaven forbid. Or maybe the apprentice boy had gotten in good with that waitress of his. If so, then the boss could pretend to sleep awhile longer. He'd had his own escapades as a young man struggling to evade the notice of a pushy shop owner. Couldn't have the lad slacking off, but everyone needed a good time now and then.

It was just like with iron: Heat it, beat it, and let it cool; that was the secret of good steel...

"Er, um..."

The voice was so small. It was the first time he'd heard it, but it sounded like hundreds of others that had passed through his shop. Uneasy, lacking confidence, but tinged with excitement—the voice of a rookie. Someone who was here without their parents knowing, maybe, or who had fled home and made their way to the armorer's.

Were they here before or after registering at the Guild? It was a minor detail. How much money did they have? And how much would they put into equipment?

Did they know how to handle a weapon? What was their body type? What kinds of weapon and armor would that inspire them to buy? As both a professional and a salesman, those were the things that interested the boss. And thus...

Low end of the middle, I'd say.

The customer was a young girl, small and skinny. She shuffled around the shop like a lost child, hesitant and withdrawn. A long, straight sword rested in a

weathered scabbard at her hip, the weight of it causing her to lean to one side. She seemed focused on how the sword hung at her hip, but from the slight clatter, it would seem the tip was also scraping along the ground.

In spite of all of that, though, she was still the low end of the middle. Not the low end, period.

The girl groaned quietly to herself, looked at some products and then at their price tags, and crooked her fingers, doing the math—and then her eyes went wide. Clearly troubled, she shifted to the right, then to the left, picking up and inspecting various merchandise before lapsing into thought again.

Question is, when should I break in?

Suddenly, though, the bell on the door jingled, and the girl stiffened.

“Well, now...” A sensuous voice drifted into the workshop. It was followed a moment later by a shapely leg, then a voluptuous body. The woman with her wide-brimmed, pointy hat and her staff looked at the girl as if seeing something very strange. It was hardly the evil eye, yet the girl reacted as if she’d been put under a hex.

It was too much to ask this complete beginner to withstand that look. Most of the men on the frontier all too easily fell under its spell. Only a select few could meet that witch’s wiles and remain unmoved—for example...

“Hey, something wrong?”

He appeared from behind the witch, as soundless as a leopard or a tiger—a dashing, handsome man. Given that he was dressed in full armor and carried his famous spear across his shoulders, they must either be on their way to an adventure or just coming back from one.

The spearman glanced around the shop, and when he saw the girl, small as a reha, he bared his teeth in a grin. “A rookie, eh?”

The girl worked her mouth open and shut, looking like she could hardly breathe, but finally she managed just two words: “Not yet...”

“So you haven’t registered, but you plan to, right? That makes you a fellow adventurer—just a much younger one. Look forward to workin’ with you.”

This time, the girl really was lost for words; just nodding her head seemed to be a life-or-death struggle.

The Silver rank tag that hung from his neck; the faint gleam of his enchanted spear in the shop's dim light; the way he carried himself. They didn't know where this girl was from, but if it was anywhere on the western frontier, she would at least know this hero's name. Perhaps his achievements weren't as grand as those of *the* hero, but it was said that this man had never known defeat at the hands of any monster in this world. He had hunted every fiend, pursued every outlaw, rising rank by rank and earning the respect that would put the true shine on his Silver.

No simple braggard could be like this man. Nor anyone who was simply softhearted. They said he had even received an invitation once to join the Royal Guard—no telling if it was true or not, but it was easy to believe it of him. And now this brave warrior, this character from a fairy tale or a minstrel's song, was looking forward to working with her! You couldn't blame the girl for being a little tongue-tied. (He pretended not to notice Witch giving a smile as if to say *All right already.*)

At that point, Spearman abruptly seemed to lose interest in the girl. "Okay, then. Where's the master of the house...?"

No, he hadn't lost interest—but if she wasn't going to say anything to him, then he had other things to do. He worked his way nimbly among the close-packed shelves, moving with a grace one wouldn't have expected from someone wearing all that armor.

"U-um..."

That voice, that tiny whisper—hardly more than an intake of breath—stopped him in his tracks.

The girl stood there with her fists clenched, appearing to regret having said anything, but she was looking straight ahead. Witch chuckled and smiled, then crouched down so her gaze was level with the girl's. The young woman inadvertently took a step back, bumping up against a shelf full of armor, huddling into herself with fright at the clatter.

"And what...might...you need?"

“A h-helmet...” The girl swallowed heavily. She was embarrassed by the sound of her own voice, so quiet it could hardly have competed with the buzzing of an insect. “I’d like to buy...a helmet.”

Witch didn’t say anything. Neither did Spearman. Sometimes silence could invite a person to continue.

“I think probably...I need it. I don’t want people thinking it’s just—just because someone told me to. But...”

She was worried that if she bought a helmet, *someone* would think she had simply taken their advice, but if she didn’t—and failed—she worried the same person would point and laugh. It was clear to see that the girl had arrived here only after thorough ridicule.

Can’t exactly blame ’em, the boss thought. After all, most people would laugh if they heard this gangly girl child say she was going to be an adventurer. It wasn’t an issue of weighing the pros against the cons: They’d laugh the moment they heard her voice.

The simple fact that she hadn’t given up in the face of a little mocking already spoke well of her prospects as an adventurer. Most people would have thrown in the towel then and there. And it was usually the right choice. Because if you *were* the type to quit because somebody laughed at you, then chances were you wouldn’t survive adventuring.

“Do whatever you want.” Spearman’s tone was blunt, but it was his way of showing kindness. “You’re gonna trust that equipment with your life. There’s only one person who can take responsibility for that, and it’s you, eh?”

She might decide not to wear a helmet, only to have a goblin or a troll or a bandit strike her in the head and kill her.

She might decide to wear a helmet, then find her head attacked by an otherwise harmless Rust Eater and die.

She might decide not to wear a helmet, only to have a slime fall on her from above, melt her face off, and kill her.

She might decide to wear a helmet, only to have a slime fall on her from above, get inside the helmet, suffocate her, and kill her.

And then, whether she decided to wear a helmet or not, she might run into a red dragon and be scorched by its poison or burning breath—and die.

In each case, it would be the girl who would die, not whoever had pointed and laughed at her.

“They can say what they like, but they don’t have to take responsibility—and it’s exactly because they don’t have to take responsibility that they can say what they like. Doesn’t matter what you do.” Spearman followed this up with a quick snort.

The girl was silent for a moment, chewing the matter over; then she nodded a couple of times. “Um...”

“Yes...? What...?” Witch smiled slightly and peered into the girl’s face. This time, the girl looked squarely back at her.

“Thank you...v-very much.”

The scraggly girl said she would think it over some more, then bowed to the adventurers. The weight of the sword threatened to pull her clean over, but she managed to get herself upright. Next, she fixed her gaze back on the helmets, pacing through the shop once more. The little figure flitted from this shelf to that one. That was when the boss picked his moment.

“...Gods, get too old and suddenly you’re napping when y’don’t even mean to.” The shopkeeper fought back a yawn and fixed his one eye on the two adventurers.

“Napping? Hell, I thought you were dead,” Spearman quipped.

“As if you could be rid of me that easily. I’d keep selling if I were on death’s doorstep—and I haven’t even passed on the secret of good steel yet.” The shopkeeper took Spearman’s jab in stride. Joking went hand in hand with adventuring. But he had business. “So what’ll it be today?”

The likes of them were unlikely to need anything with the weapons and armor in his shop. About the only Silver-ranked adventurer around who bothered to buy anything from him was that one oddball. Which meant these two were after some other kind of equipment, but what?

“We’re going...far away. We’ll need...outerwear.”

“Seeing as we’re going to the trouble of shopping anyway, wouldn’t mind if it was newly made.”

There were, for example, enchanted boots that could ward off the cold and enable the wearer to walk on ice. But then, it was the way of adventurers to want to look good while they did their jobs. Not all of them wanted to go around decked out in magical accoutrements like a living winter solstice tree.

Besides, even the least-distinguished spell user could spot the sparkle of magical energy if they looked hard enough. Adventuring pros knew that when it came to spying or infiltration, magic equipment had disadvantages as well as advantages.

“You won’t find the capital’s latest fashions around here, I’m afraid.”

“Don’t care whether it’s trendy. Only care whether *she* likes it.”

“Well, some women would look good in anything.”

Witch gave him a happy grin—good gods, but that woman could smile. He had a sudden impulse to lower the price on whatever she wanted.

He told them to wait for a moment, then went to the storage room and pulled out everything that might qualify as an overgarment. There was fur and every other kind of material. Different styles and sizes. The shopkeeper laid them all out on the counter so Witch could choose among them.

It would be uncouth for a man to try to explain too much about women’s clothing. *Just need to answer anything I’m asked; that’ll be enough.* “Going far away... So yer not gonna be a part of this dungeon contest everyone’s all abuzz about?”

“I’m too mature to get my kicks showing up newbies and not mature enough to be a decent mentor.” Spearman flapped his hand as if waving the subject away. “Anyway, I’m sick and tired of *his* dungeon.”

“Heh, heh...” Witch laughed even as she picked up a piece of clothing here and there and held it up to her ample chest, occasionally draping something over her shoulders.

Spearman glanced at her. “Black’s never a bad choice, but white looks pretty good on you, too.”

It was that moment the workshop boss chose to scowl and say, “Hey, you don’t happen to know what my apprentice is up to, do you?”

“Aw, yeah, that girl at the bar dragged him off somewhere. For leftovers or some new concoction or something.”

“Well, if y’see the boy, tell him I’m looking for ’im, and I’m mad as a plucked goose.”

“Sure, if I see him.”

“If, indeed...”

Spearman grinned pointedly, showing his teeth. The boss ignored him, of course. His apprentice thought he saw through the old man, but he needed at least another decade for that.

“All, right... This one, if you...don’t mind?” After a good deal of consideration, Witch had chosen a white fur garment and was clutching it to her chest.

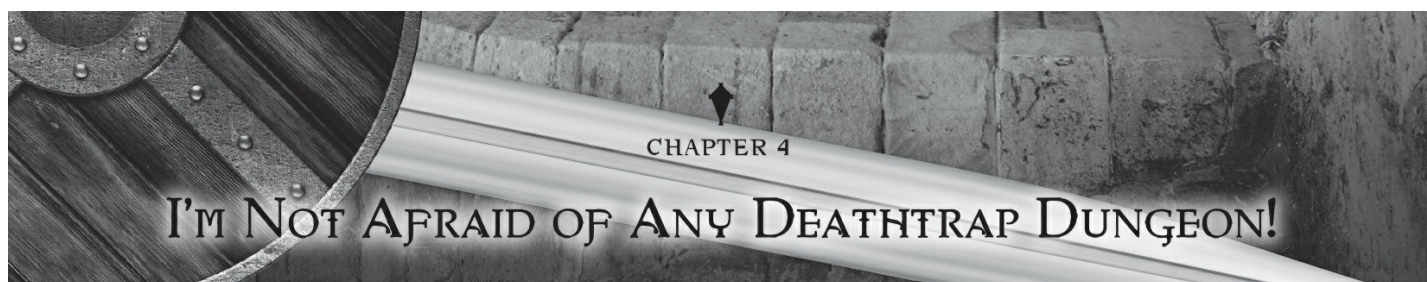
Spearman nodded, dropped some gold coins on the counter, then said, “A’ight, then. We’re off on a date-venture!” He strode out of the shop.

“...‘Date-venture.’ Pfah!” It was a ridiculous way to talk. The old man watched the experienced adventurers go, the bell jingling again as they left, then he let out a sigh. Gods, but he hated getting old.

Suddenly he found a memory drifting through his mind, an image of a couple of youngsters who’d come through his shop some years ago. One of them a pathetic boy who couldn’t read, write, or do the simplest math, who’d arrived from the sticks with nothing but a single spear and an empty head. The other a young woman who kept her face carefully composed, walked self-consciously, and grasped her staff nervously.

They were the low end of the middle.

Then he snorted, so softly that even the girl picking out a helmet didn’t hear him.



Time went on, like the leaves that danced off the trees in the wind. A dungeon had been created in some ruins, nearby villages had been informed, and merchants were preparing to set up shop and show their wares.

Many people had to shut themselves up inside during the long winter. It was a dark, quiet, trying season. If there was any event even a little bit pleasant before that fast-approaching time, people would flock to it. When the day came, even the chill in the air would be uncommonly exciting.

“Well, cold is as cold does...” Cow Girl slid out of bed, hugging herself and mumbling about how chilly it was. *I hope winter doesn’t get too cold this year, though.* The previous winter had been unusually long, and Cow Girl had found herself involved in some very strange events—anyway, it’d been a cold one.

It was hard to make herself move in the chill, so she resolved to get her clothes on as quick as she could. She put on her newly knitted sweater and her work uniform, hung her charm around her neck, and tucked it under her collar so she wouldn’t lose it. The red scale glittered as if with fire—was it just her imagination, or did it seem slightly warm to the touch? Finally, she opened the window, ushering in the light and breeze...

“Hmm...?” She didn’t see *him* anywhere. Or perhaps more precisely, she didn’t sense him—maybe he had already left. She could see footprints on the frosty ground, left there by a bold stride.

Hmm... Maybe he’d gotten up early just for the sheer fun of crunching across the frost? Not likely...

They were grown-ups now, of course, but she remembered him doing that when they’d been small.

“And that has to mean...”

Cow Girl pulled on her long boots, then crept outside, trying not to make a sound. The canary was chirruping sleepily in the kitchen, but they would both

have to wait a little while for breakfast. As for the animals—well, they would be fine. Strangely enough, the barn was warmer than the house where the humans lived, and it had food right there.

Cow Girl reached out toward her fogging breath—that special facet of a winter morning—and looked up at the sky. Then she followed his footprints, walking alongside them, finding fresh frost to crunch. She didn't have to follow them to know where they went, but it didn't matter. Chasing after him was part of the fun.

The footprints arrived at the shed he rented. The impressions in the frost started there and returned there as well. Cow Girl pushed the door open gently. It went *creak*, like a tree. It just did that in the cold; nothing they could do about it.

"Ha, I knew it." She placed her hands on her hips, sighed dramatically, and injected a note of irritation into her voice.

"...Hrk."

As ever—as expected—he was there, sitting at the workbench at the far end of the shed. He was wearing every bit of his armor, which must have made him feel even colder than it already was.

"Morning," Cow Girl said, just a hint of an edge in her voice. "Couldn't sleep?"

"I did," he replied promptly. She had to bite back a smile. "I did sleep, as far as it went."

"And I'm not sure that was very far," she said, sighing at what sounded to her like an evasive answer. She closed the door behind her. She knew the reasons, all of them, but if he was going to keep it from her, then she could at least be permitted to tweak him a bit.

Once, a winter catastrophe had forced them to survive together in a way she'd never imagined—that gave new meaning to sleep going only so far. *To be fair, that was an emergency situation.* The reason this time was different, of course. It was simple to see.

She felt floaty, like her brain was sloshing around in her skull. Or like the taste of breakfast after a night when she hadn't slept. Like the blue of the dawn sky

when she hadn't caught a wink. Her head was clear, her vision sharp, her thinking fast, yet none of it seemed to cohere.

There was something that had to be done. He moved quickly, carefully, but his motions were rough, somehow. Just like her on a morning when she knew he would be coming back from an adventure. Anticipation—that's what the feeling was. He was looking forward to something.

"So what is it you're doing today?"

"Directing the inside of a dungeon."

She'd lost count of how many times she'd asked this question since the decision had been made, but he still took the time to answer. "Hmm," she responded, also for the umpteenth time, then padded up behind him. She sat down beside him; even with her woven shirt on, she could feel a slight chill from his armor.

She didn't dislike the feeling.

"Perhaps it would be more accurate to say I'm something of an MC. They call it the Dungeon Master or the Game Master."

"Sounds important."

"I think so."

Now she saw. So that was it. She searched him for clues as his helmet nodded. It was unusual for him but also completely understandable. First-time jitters.

"I can see why you'd be nervous," she whispered with a chuckle.

He was quiet for a moment, then said slowly, "...To be perfectly honest, I can't do much in this job."

"Well, it came up so suddenly, didn't it?"

"No..." He grunted. Then the helmet shifted left and right. "No, that's not what I meant."

Then silence again. Was he troubled or merely thinking?

I'm sure it's both, Cow Girl thought. She brought her arms around to hug her

knees in the chilly shed. Then she leaned to one side, letting her body weight edge over. The armor trembled slightly but supported her.

After a long moment: “I was thinking that as hard as I’ve worked to hone my skills, this is all they amount to.” His words were quiet and spare.

He’d thought about how goblins fought, and based on that, he would arrange goblins and set up traps. That was all. After all the thinking and puzzling over the map of this dungeon, this was the conclusion he had reached. “Everything I have learned and gained is not so important after all.” *It’s all just for show.*

Cow Girl uttered a confused “Hmm” at this revelation, and finally she could only whisper: “It’s a bad habit of yours.”

I mean it. He picks the weirdest times to have no confidence in himself.

A late dawn peeked through the window at them where she leaned against him. To think that he should lack confidence, when he never hesitated to do anything he thought he could do. Or maybe he only pretended not to hesitate.

He was still so stubborn—that was one thing that had never changed. It was still true, in spite of all the ways he inspired confidence in her. For all that, within himself, he hadn’t the slightest belief that things would go well.

Shivering against the cold, she nestled closer to him. “You used your... tabletop game, was that it?” She was pretty sure that was what it was called. “You used it to test out your dungeon a whole bunch, right?”

“That doesn’t guarantee the real thing will work as well.” He could be so darned *direct* sometimes. “There are never any guarantees.”

“It never did matter what I said to you when you were feeling anxious,” she said, a gentle tease—causing him, naturally, to go quiet.

It was such a *familiar* reaction that Cow Girl smiled, strangely happy. It was exactly like it used to be—even though of course there were plenty of differences, too. For example, the fact that now she was able to apologize right away.

“Sorry, sorry. But hey, if that’s how you feel, then just make sure you do the things you can do right now, okay?”

“The things I can do...”

“That’s right. Everything you’re capable of.”

“...” He said nothing at first, just grunted. Then he asked, “Like what, for example?”

“Well, let’s see...” Cow Girl pursed her lips and let out a long, slow breath. A thin strand of white mist drifted up to the ceiling, vanishing as it was overtaken by the morning light. She watched it go, then said, “That’s it,” and nodded firmly. “For starters, let’s have breakfast!”

“A meal?”

“You started shuffling around while it was still dark without even having anything to eat—that’s why your thoughts are so dark.” She puffed out her ample chest and chuckled, proud of this declaration. *A bit of a forceful hand—that’s what we need today.*

They had worked hard for this day, after all. Like the day when she had worn her blue dress.

Cow Girl tossed herself forward, peering up at his helmet from below. “And we have to polish your armor and helmet!”

“Hrk...” A quiet grunt. Ah, he was feeling awkward. Cow Girl smiled in devilish amusement. She couldn’t see his eyes behind his visor, but she could tell he was looking at her. “You’re not out there to hunt goblins today, after all, right?”

“...That’s true.”

“Then you’d better look like the distinguished Silver-ranked adventurer you are!”

If I don’t get him looking halfway decent, it’ll look bad for me, too, she thought. There was nothing she could do about the cheapness of his equipment, but she wasn’t about to leave it grimy. She picked up a rag off the workbench, gave a little shout, “Hup!”—and reached toward him. As she vigorously polished his helmet, the metal-clad head rocked from side to side. It was like he was at the mercy of a child or a large dog; she was starting to enjoy it. She abandoned all restraint, grinning as she scrubbed at some unidentifiable

splotch.

Come to think of it, what happened to the helmet he used to wear, with the horns? From back before he had broken them off. How about that one?



“I can’t change my helmet,” came the immediate answer when Cow Girl asked. “But I would be open to your suggestions about how to look more impressive.” Then he added, “At least, when I’m not hunting goblins.” That only added to her amusement, and Cow Girl started laughing.

They may have had an early start today, but there was still plenty of work to be done. Her uncle was probably planning on setting up shop at today’s event. Selling milk from their camel, perhaps. It was impossible to say whether it would go well, but the only way to find out was to try. That was something she’d learned in the years since she’d been reunited with *him*—a lesson she’d been schooled in more thoroughly than she’d ever expected.

“Do you think goblins...?” he began suddenly.

“Hmm?” she asked, wrapping herself around him.

“Do you think goblins will show up?”

His voice sounded strange. Tired, but also like a child inquiring of an adult. Whatever she said, she could tell it would become the truth for him.

All right, then; there was only one thing she could say to this old friend of hers.

“I sure hope not.” Then she patted his head gently, his helmet having regained some of its luster.

He was silent for a moment, but finally he whispered: “...I hope not, too.”

§

It was Guild Girl’s belief that a little primping could help invigorate a person for the day. She’d gotten to bed a little bit early the night before (resisting the urge to stay up into the wee hours, checking and rechecking that everything was in order), and now she was waking up early, too.

She climbed out of bed, shivering with the frigid air that sneaked past the stones of the building. She slid her bare feet into a pair of slippers, then tugged back the curtain at the window just a little. The sky was still a predawn blue-black, and she realized that she finally understood what color ultramarine was supposed to be.

She hadn't heard the temple bells ring yet, but the color of the sky told her she'd woken up right when she'd meant to; she clenched her fist in triumph.

Her to-do list: eat, make herself up, dress, and get out of here. Oh, and make sure she had all the stuff she would need. Five things to do.

I sure wouldn't be finding anywhere to eat at this hour, she thought, feeling a touch of justifiable pride at having been foresighted enough to have bought some food for breakfast the night before. It was important, she felt, to compliment oneself, even on seemingly minor things. Otherwise, how would one build self-confidence?

Getting dressed before she ate risked getting her outfit messy, so Guild Girl set out her food at the table still in her nightclothes.

"Let's see, here. Honey-filled bread, a boiled egg, and a baked treat... Then we add just a sip of grape wine." She put the baked item on its own plate, then sat down, brought her hands together, and closed her eyes. "Thank you, O players who are seated around the great table of the stars..."

She thanked the Supreme God, the Trade God, the Earth Mother, and the God of Knowledge, all the many deities, and above all, the Valkyrie. All of them had made it possible for her to have this food before her and for her to greet the coming day, for which she was grateful. Then she added:

Please let today's event go well...

Guild Girl was something of an unbeliever—she was usually too busy to pray—but at home, she minded the manners she'd been raised with. Sadly, she'd never been graced with a miracle, but she at least understood how to pray.

She didn't believe it was pointless to pray to Fate or Chance. No life was free from their influence, an influence that could cause entirely unexpected things to happen.

The gods deserved respect; that was why she prayed, and it was why she and the others were Pray-er Characters.

"Okay! Let's dig in...!"

I know it's not very ladylike to act all gluttonous first thing in the morning, but

still...

Just because one had time on one's hands was no excuse to loll around. Guild Girl tried to eat as quickly but also as properly as she could, knowing that even if no one was around to see her, she was always before the gods.

The ritual of prayer was over. Now she had to hurry—but not so much that it was unseemly. She pulled off her nightclothes and tossed them aside, including rolling her underwear down, over the gentle curve of her behind and past her shapely legs. She caught it on her toes and kicked it into the basket, then filled a glass washbowl from a carafe.

She started to shiver the moment she stuck her hand in the water—it was so cold—but she kept telling herself to bear it as she washed her face. She dipped a cloth in the water for good measure and started wiping herself down, removing any trace of sweat from the night before.

“And now...” She draped the cloth carelessly from a hanger, reaching next for a bottle of perfume sitting on her vanity. “Hee-hee... It smells lovely.” She picked her favorite from among the several lined up in front of her, undid the stopper, and savored the aroma. That alone was enough to boost her mood. She could see herself in the full-length mirror, an expensive thing her parents had sent once in celebration. She saw herself drip some of the thick perfume oil onto her palm.

“Hrn...!” she gasped as the cool liquid touched her skin. She forced herself to keep going, covering her arms and legs as well. Her skin was so pale she didn't need any bloodletting, and her body was slim and svelte—but neither of these things was an accident. They took real work.

She was proud of her body; she exercised fastidiously every day to maintain it. And she enjoyed looking after herself.

“Hrm...”

I wonder if I should use the ribbon and the belladonna eye drops today. The medicine caused her eyes to open wider, which made them quite lovely, but she couldn't stand how it made them water. A lot of men seemed to like a woman with perpetually brimming eyes, but it was hard to work that way, and she hated that. But the state of her eyes would determine which of her favorite

ribbons she would want to wear...



Then again, the man she'd be working with today wasn't someone who was very concerned about people's appearances.

"I guess I could consider it...a good-luck charm," she said. She set her ribbon and the little bottle on the vanity so she wouldn't forget them, then picked up a delicate tool and started rapidly applying some makeup. Only as much as she felt like, though. A bit of whitening powder on the cheeks, a dash of rouge on her lips. She puckered her lips briefly, and then everything was perfect.

She took out her outfit for the day (chosen the night before) and began to pull it on. For underwear, something new and lacy. Not that it made any real difference, of course.

It's not like anyone's going to see it.

She seemed to recall her friend the high elf saying something to that effect in a conversation they'd had long ago. A giggle escaped her at the thought.

With her underwear on, she moved on to her blouse and pants, then her boots, all perfectly fitted to her body. Going-out clothes—not her usual uniform. They were going to get dirty, she knew, but she was still careful not to get makeup on anything as she dressed.

Finally, she took her hair, which she'd let loose the night before so it would be relaxed and wavy, combed it carefully, and then braided it.

Everyone had their own preference for the order in which they did their hair, makeup, and clothes, and even Guild Girl wasn't sure what the "right answer" was.

But with her skin clean, her makeup on, and her clothes and hair just so, doing up the buttons...

...feels right, somehow.

When she'd done everything, she stood in front of the mirror and twirled around. Then she adjusted her hair a bit. In the end, she hadn't used the eye drops, so she'd go with *this* ribbon today—and she didn't think it looked bad, not at all.

"All right...!" She turned to the mirror and gave it her best smile. The woman

in the mirror smiled back at her: not an adventurer, but not a Guild employee, either. Instead, the hostess of a dungeon exploration competition.

Yes, this was perfect.

She was singing her own praises, but sometimes you had to. How could you do your work for the day if you went into it without confidence?

“I’ve got my notebook, my stylus...” She’d be outside today, so she’d picked a sturdy metal stylus. Guild Girl grabbed her bag, full of her writing supplies and everything else she might need, and slung it over her shoulder, then turned toward the door.

“Oops, that’s right...”

She pattered back to the vanity, grabbed the other ribbon and the small jar of belladonna liquid, and added them to her bag. Consider them good-luck charms. Even if she wasn’t sure they would help. Then she left the house, her steps light, locked the door behind her, and headed out into the world. The town was already turning lively—everyone knew this was a festive morning.

§

Festive morning or no, *some* people were trapped down in the dark, weaving spells!

Three brief words of true power. A sigil formed with the fingers, and Warlock’s thoughts (her surly, annoyed thoughts) came together. The filthy teeth she’d scattered on the cave floor began to bubble and puff up. Bones formed, sinew and blood vessels stretched as internal organs fashioned themselves—it was a sickening sight all around. When it was over, she was faced with ten or so dirty little creatures with green skin.

“And... *Facio...ministeralis...goblin*. Form goblin servants,” Warlock said, the little devils with their gleaming gold eyes all following after her. It made her look the very picture of an evil mage, but in fact, these things were goblins in appearance only. They were golems with minimal autonomy, hardly different in principle from the Dragontooth Warriors of the lizardmen.

Still, that didn’t mean they could be put to any arbitrary use Warlock wanted. When one failed to have respect for life, tragedy inevitably ensued. Balance was

exacted in all things, including magic. Hadn't the great sage said it? *"I've seen things you humans wouldn't believe."* To be able to say that...

Goblins aren't smart enough to come up with that—or poetic enough.

Hell, if they had been clever enough to understand something like the value of life, they wouldn't have been goblins. Warlock leaned against the stone wall, making no attempt to hide the fatigue she felt at the shaving away of both her mental and physical strength. She looked around at the other wizards who had each summoned their own troop of goblins.

"Excellent work." The voice came from behind her, sounding honeyed; Warlock felt her shoulders twitch. She looked over to find an elf woman crossing her arms, looking disgustingly elegant. Warlock wanted to tell her to do something about the way she reeked of face powder, but instead the woman just stood there grinning. Gods, this was awful. She had no idea how Warlock felt—she was *enjoying* herself. *Gods.*

"Maybe not quite fit for an archfiend's wasteland fortress, though," the elf went on.

"...You say that like you've seen one of those."

"Who says I haven't?"

Warlock went quiet for a moment, then replied slowly, "Goblins. They only belong in abandoned mines—you know, holes in the ground." Goblins were only foot soldiers. Warlock looked down at the creatures around her. The real threat was whoever controlled the goblins, like the archfiend the elf had mentioned or some great magic user.

Goblins themselves weren't remarkable at all. They weren't important, and they weren't threatening.

So...was she complimenting me just now?

Before Warlock could ask, the elf woman drawled, "I mean, damn, we could make some decent money with these things." Warlock was forever wondering if this woman had no impulse at all to hide her uncultured side. Instead, she sighed. "What, like you never thought of it," the elf woman retorted.

“No, I never did, and *if* I did, we couldn’t do it anyway,” Warlock said with all the snappishness of someone who hasn’t given up on trying to bring a recalcitrant child around. She used magic for a living. That meant using all kinds of words, yet when it came to this woman, she never knew what to say. Why waste her energy trying to explain when the woman would never listen to her? Strength should be conserved. Especially by wizards.

“Why not?” the elf woman asked, her eyes gleaming like those of a child needling her mother. It was infuriating.

“Why not?” Warlock repeated with a derisive snort. “Because that’s how magic *works*.”

Indeed it was. Although the less people knew about magic, the more eager they were to speculate and explain. They were like someone feeling an elephant in the dark, or perhaps like an ant frightened by an elephant’s footsteps. They couldn’t calm down until they’d forced the phenomenon into some familiar category. Having done so, they believed they understood it and thought very highly of themselves for their understanding.

Warlock couldn’t stand it. She gave a disgusted cluck of her tongue. Given the choice between a know-it-all idiot and a stupid idiot, she’d take the one who knew they were stupid any day of the week.

Even if it would tire me out having to entertain them...

“Where are the other idiots?” Warlock growled. “I know they’re not stupid enough to forget about their jobs.”

“They said they were going to check out the festival to find breakfast for us.”

“An idiot with an excuse is an idiot invincible,” Warlock said.

Was it considerate of them? Yes, probably. After all, she was going to be stuck here making goblins all day; it was her job. She might grumble, but she was getting paid for it, so she wouldn’t complain too loudly...

But I know them. They just wanted to eat some street food.

The ax wielder, yeah, and the monk, too. The real problem was the weird lady next to her.

“And why aren’t you out there with them?”

“I happen to like it underground.”

“Uh-huh.”

Warlock wasn’t interested in the flimsy excuse; she met it with something equally noncommittal and then started looking around. The interior of the ruins or the cave or wherever they were was now bursting with goblin servants and their wizard masters.

She’s not wrong. It does look like some fortress of shadows or something. The goblins milled about but kept to their assigned places in the cave. Nobody would have noticed if there were real goblins mixed in among them. Not even Warlock. That was how it was, even for self-proclaimed intelligent people. That was the sort of thing best left to specialists, not guessed at by amateurs. It was Goblin Slayer who’d come up with this idea in the first place, and the now-exhausted wizards wouldn’t be much help.

Anyway, not my business if something happens. Out of my hands. Above my pay grade.

“Just wanna say one thing,” the elf woman added. Warlock managed to ask *What?* without words, shooting a sour look in her direction. “The face powder is a personal preference.”

Warlock squinted at her, unsure what she was saying. Warlock hadn’t even been thinking about the powder. There were too many people in the Four-Cornered World for her to fret about things like that. She was a lot more concerned about people who wanted to boss her around or tell her what to do—and a lot more eager to avoid them. If this elf woman was doing what she did because she liked it, then let her do what she liked. Warlock truly, sincerely could not have cared less.

“...Huh” was all she said in response, the word, like her sigh, slipping away into the darkness.

§

Had there ever been so many people gathered in front of these ruins before? Priestess and the king’s younger sister stood holding hands, openmouthed at

the scene before them in the morning fog. The fog came from countless mouths, so numerous that the chill wind couldn't blow it all away.

In this enormous crowd, there were hardly any spectators—ordinary people who weren't adventurers. There were a few vendors selling various grilled meats (dog, cat, or chicken; your choice) or hawking treats and drinks, but everyone else present was an adventurer. Or perhaps she should say an adventurer hopeful. Most of them didn't even qualify as rookies yet.

They walked this way and that, dressed in whatever gear took their fancy, the excitement and nervousness visible in their gaits. The majority of them were orphans or from destitute families, forced into adventuring by necessity. They weren't there just to have fun—but, well, in some ways it was a matter of perspective. It was always helpful to expand the definition of who was an adventurer and thus attract more of them.

I doubt I could have imagined this way back then, though, the king's younger sister thought and then bit back a laugh. She was already thinking of the luxuries of the palace and her temple as “way back then.”

You had to be astounding to get people to listen to what you had to say. It was important for anything to be fun and interesting if you wanted to attract people. No one ever wanted to listen to a dirty, seedy-looking nobody mumble on about something difficult or inconsequential.

“I know it must not look like much compared with the festivals in the capital...,” Priestess said, smiling with some embarrassment.

“Who's comparing?!” the king's younger sister replied promptly. She clenched her fists emphatically, producing a salutary jangling from the sounding staff in her hands. Unlike before, she was pleased to be standing next to Priestess with all her gear in order. Mistakes were mistakes, but to learn from them and move forward—that was something to be proud of. “I'm really surprised by all the people who want to be adventurers, though.”

“Right,” Priestess agreed. “We have an awful lot of registrants each year.”

“My big brother says there were almost no novices around for a while there...”

He had been referring to a time well in the past, an era she knew only from his stories. The tales of the legendary Dungeon of the Dead, with its endless loot and the adventurers attracted thereby, were the exception, not the rule. The thought reminded her that there must still be people in the world today who were altogether uninterested in adventuring. That was part of what made events like this so necessary.

I have to pay close attention and make sure it all goes off smoothly, the princess thought, nodding to herself with fresh resolve. Then she spotted a stall selling ice treats and found herself drawn to it. She had been presented with milk-based frozen treats before and knew how they tasted, but she thought this smelled a little different than usual. When she asked about it, she was told it was made from the milk of an animal from a far-off land.

It's always good to be able to try new things, she thought.

"One, please."

"Coming right up." The middle-aged shopkeeper nodded a bit brusquely—he looked like the brusque kind—and passed her a frozen treat poured over a baked good. The king's younger sister handed him a silver coin and took the snack, then pattered back to Priestess, who was bowing to the shopkeeper (maybe she knew him or something); meanwhile, the king's younger sister took a bite of the treat.

It was chilly and sweet. It had a richness to it—what *was* richness anyway?—but it wasn't too heavy. The sweetness of it was positively mysterious, not like sheep's or cow's milk. There was only one word to describe it:

"...Delicious!"

"I'm glad to hear that," Priestess said with a giggle.

The king's younger sister smacked her lips at this most precious (and tasty) of acquisitions, but then she had a thought. "You want a bite?"

She held out her spoon. Priestess said, "Er," looking around in distress, but then finally nodded. "Well, since you're offering..." She took the wooden spoon almost with embarrassment and tasted some of the treat. "Mmm..." She licked it off, savoring the sweetness, and the gentle blush in her face turned to a smile.

The two of them, as similar and as different as sisters, looked at each other and giggled.

A frozen treat in winter—what an innocent thing. It was already so chilly, and the treat so cold, that it made them want something warm—in other words, it made them want to check out the other stalls. One should enjoy the heat of summer in summer, and the cold of winter in winter. Hadn't some poet said that?

"It's really surprising, though," the king's younger sister said.

The two of them were wandering about in front of the entrance to the ruins, taking in everything they could on the pretext of careful observation. In part because this was *the* event before winter solstice, every strong (or strong-willed) youngster from every pioneer village seemed to be in attendance.

Priestess, busy looking at the panoply of equipment, all of it either without a scratch or obviously just dragged from a storeroom somewhere, cocked her head and asked, "What is?"

"Well, um," the king's younger sister started, looking for the words in thin air. "I mean Goblin Slayer."

She had no idea whether a given adventurer's equipment was good or bad, but she understood this much: *His* equipment was in a far worse state than that of any of the participants in this contest.

"He came up with the idea of making goblins with magic and using them for targets. I thought that was really smart."

"Huh?" Priestess said, blinking. "But those aren't really goblins, right?" She was sincerely perplexed.

"They aren't...?"

"No, they really aren't." Priestess sounded supremely sure, supremely direct. She sounded so right and yet so mistaken. No, that wasn't what drew the other girl's attention.

Did she always come off like this...? The king's younger sister felt a bit dizzy. She thought—she was pretty sure—that it must have been because of the ice

treat. Not because she'd seen a completely unexpected side of the person who'd been her direct motivation for entering the Temple. *Yeah, I'm sure that's it. The sweets.*

She nodded to herself, then looked around at the contest participants in hopes of finding some other topic of conversation.

To repeat, the king's younger sister, having spent so much of her life in the palace, couldn't tell good adventurers and equipment from bad ones. Yet, even so, there were certain people who grabbed her attention. Say, for example, the three-person party over there.

"Still...I'm really not sure about participating as the leader of the party. Do you really think it's a good idea?"

"...A wizard isn't a very typical leader, and having *you* support *me* is out of the question."

"Hey, don't you think that's a little harsh?"

"No, I just think you'd stand out like a sore thumb."

"It's not an issue of how you act so much as how you look."

"Hrm. Not sure how I feel about that, but all right. Say, I'd like to get something to eat before we start..."

The conversing party consisted of a warrior with blue leather armor and a sword across her back, a wizard wearing a light-pink robe, and a green-clad, spear-wielding—

"Oh!"

"Whoa!"

Let's prescind, on this occasion, from worrying about which girl made which sound. The king's younger sister and the green-clad warrior, a young woman with black hair, stopped dead in their tracks and stared at each other.

Huh. Priestess turned back with a questioning look, and the moment must indeed have seemed odd to her. After all, the king's younger sister (the girl she was supposed to be showing around) was standing frozen next to three adventurers Priestess didn't recognize. "Is anything the matter?" she asked.

Perhaps some little blunder on her own part. It was the black-haired girl who reacted first. “Y-Your Hi—” She was promptly interrupted by a jab from the wizard’s staff directly into her ribs. “I mean, *you’re here!* It’s been so long!”

“Er, uh...” Priestess looked back and forth between them, confused. Yes, she was here. Had she met this person before? When? Who was she? Before becoming an adventurer, Priestess had served at the temple, so she’d met a great many people. Not to mention a great many more since joining lay society to begin adventuring.

She had a good memory, but even she was drawing a blank for a second. She quickly clapped her hands, though. “You were at the grape harvest...!”

Yes, that was it. She’d been wearing a dazzling outfit as befitted the occasion, and she’d been alone. Above all, though, the black-haired girl had grown up somewhat since they’d met last; she seemed more adult, somehow. That was why Priestess hadn’t recognized her immediately—but now that she did, there was no question.

Priestess’s face lit up; she took the other girl’s hand tightly in hers. “I’m so glad to see you’re doing well! Are these people the friends you talked about...?”

“They sure are!” the black-haired girl said, a grin as bright as the sun spreading over her face. “My precious friends!” Her two companions blushed a little to hear her say this so forthrightly. Behind the black-haired girl, the wizard pulled her hood down a little farther, and the warrior scratched her cheek self-consciously. Priestess found it touching and smiled. She wished she could say that so openly to her own party members.

“So are you all going to participate in the dungeon exploration contest?” she asked.

“Y-yeah. I mean, yeah! Yeah, that’s exactly what we’re gonna do. Just, you know, to test ourselves out!”

“That’s terrific!” Priestess nodded, taking the somewhat stream-of-consciousness nature of the girl’s answer to be simple nervousness. She didn’t know what the girl’s current rank was, but everyone had their own path to walk in life. Priestess was well aware of exactly how blessed she was to be surrounded by Silvers. For that reason, it wouldn’t have crossed her mind to

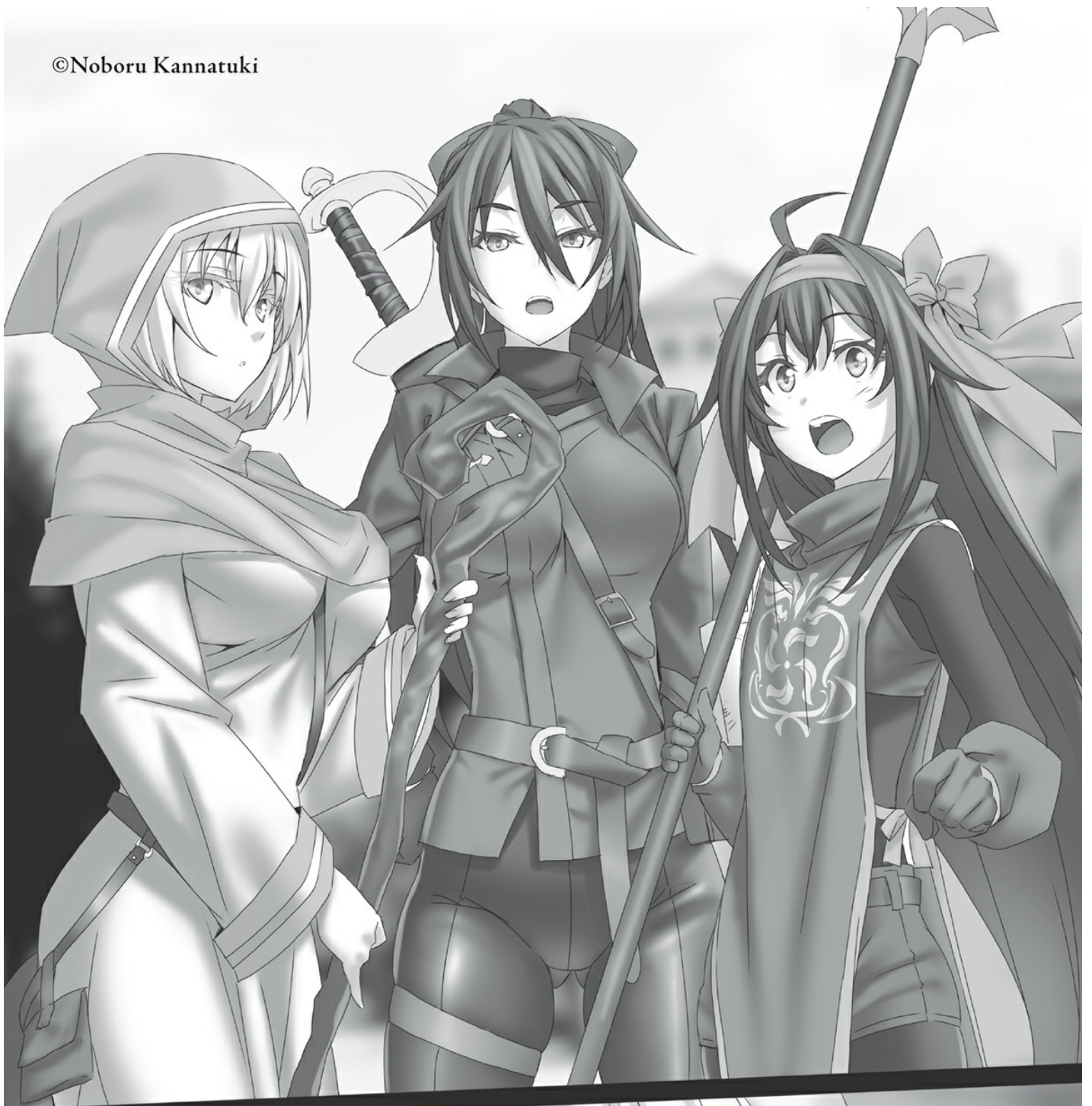
compare her situation to someone else's.

If she'd been able to stay with her original party members, who knew what point she might be at now? It wasn't an easy thing to imagine of anyone. Even if the thought did depress her from time to time.

"I'm surprised, though," Priestess said, forcing herself to sound cheerful in an effort to chase away the dark feelings that welled up from deep within her. "I never imagined you two knew each other!"

"Er, uh, yeah!" the king's younger sister said, nodding. Then, thinking better of her tone, she corrected herself: "Yes, indeed we do!" She seemed at once nervous and yet uninhibited, and that set Priestess's mind at ease as well. Even after the tragedy of being abducted by goblins, she was able to act upbeat—an admirable thing.

Then there was another of Priestess's cherished friends, Female Merchant. It made Priestess realize that people progressed and developed in their own individual ways. But as long as they *were* moving forward, that had to be a good thing. It had to be.



“Don’t tell me you’re...here on your own authority? Because...you know.”

Simply observe the king’s younger sister’s reaction:

“Nope, uh-uh, I’m really not!” She waved her hands in a near panic, looking for all the world like a child whose friend has spotted her snitching from their plate.

That’s right... Like a friend.

“That’s good, then...if that’s true.” The other warrior had her hand on her bronze sword and sounded like she didn’t quite believe the young woman. “Wouldn’t want you to worry anyone.”

“I’m on official business this time. *Official business!*” The way the king’s younger sister reacted to this show of suspicion likewise seemed like someone playing around with an older friend.

I wonder if...I look like that, Priestess thought, picturing herself with her friend the high elf. She smiled (although not happily) and promised herself she would have a bit more dignity.

“Besides, I’ve heard allll about that time you got lost when you were little!”

“If you’ve heard that story, then *learn* from it instead of acting all high-and-mighty about it. Have a little dignity.”

“Grrr...” When the king’s younger sister, cornered, growled angrily, Priestess finally couldn’t restrain herself any longer. A giggle escaped her, rippling out into the conversation. The other women looked startled for a second—then were caught up in it themselves, all laughing out loud.

Thus, it didn’t demand any courage for Priestess to say what she said next. “Um, maybe you’d like to join them for a while?”

“You sure?” the king’s younger sister asked, but Priestess nodded and replied, “Uh-huh! After all, all that’s really left is to open the event, start everyone exploring, and see how it goes.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” the younger girl said with a wave of her hand. “I’ve, you know, seen a lot of the plans.”

“But not *all* of them,” Priestess replied. Besides, having seen them was no guarantee that things would go well. Priestess could say that with certainty. She decided, therefore, that the frown the other girl gave her was just some anxiety showing, and went on: “It’s not against the rules or anything. You really don’t have to worry about it.”

“Er, uh... Right. Then that’s...fine, I guess. Yeah. Probably.”

“Oh, that’s if you three are all right with it, of course,” Priestess said, turning to the trio of adventurers. She didn’t think she needed to worry on that score, but it was the most important point. They might be taking part in a contest, but suddenly having a new party member dumped on you could upset a group’s balance. That was one reason why many experienced adventurers refused to mentor rookies without an adequate reward. Those with the courage to go on a dangerous quest with one or two deadweights holding them back were few and far between.

Thus, Priestess let out a breath of relief when the wizard spoke up with the decisive words: “I don’t mind... In fact, I think that would be good. We’ll be jumping into the whirlwind, but in some ways that would be safest.”

“Mm... My job is to simply stand up front and fight, so it doesn’t make much difference to me.” The warrior didn’t look thrilled, but she didn’t raise any objections, either.

The final vote was still to be cast, though...

“Well, sounds like that settles it!” The girl with the iron spear grinned wide enough to show nearly all her teeth. “You’ll be adventuring with us today!”

“Er, uh...” The king’s younger sister didn’t seem quite sure how to react. After spending a moment flummoxed, though, she settled on a smile more or less of pleasure. “In that case, thanks for having me along!”

“Sure thing!”

Priestess let out another sigh of relief when she saw the two of them were chatting amiably. *It’ll be fine*. Priestess could feel it somehow. She was sure it would go well—the event and everything.

As for her, she would be behind the scenes with Goblin Slayer and his party

this time, and while that would be enjoyable in its own way... *It does look like an awful lot of fun to be in there exploring.*

The king's younger sister was simply present to observe; she wasn't supposed to contribute directly to running the event. But even at the most interesting competition, merely observing wasn't as much fun as being in the middle of the action. Priestess was sure this would be the best thing.

"All right, then, we've got her. We'll have her back to you safe and sound." The female warrior smiled as she watched the two girls chatter, but her tone and bearing were proper. She looked lovely and confident, making Priestess think of knights she'd seen in picture books.

Speaking of female knights, Priestess had had the good fortune to become close to one—but this woman possessed a different kind of beauty. Priestess was momentarily flustered but straightened up so as not to embarrass herself. "Thank you, ma'am!" Priestess bowed deeply, pressing her cap to her head. "I appreciate that!"

There followed a few more pleasantries, some additional chatter, and the double-checking of a handful of administrative details. When at last Priestess had told them where to check in, she thought she heard someone calling her. She looked over to see High Elf Archer waving eagerly and shouting.

Guess I'd better get going, too, she thought.

"All right, then," she said, to let the others know she was leaving.

"See you later!" the king's younger sister responded enthusiastically.

Priestess set off toward her friend at a brisk trot, but suddenly she noticed how warm the air felt against her cheeks. The chill of winter had eased somewhat. No doubt because the sun had climbed into the sky and was pouring its light down upon the world. Somehow, that made her very happy.

That wasn't (she would have sworn) the reason she completely failed to hear what the king's younger sister said next, as she turned back to the other adventurers. "Uh...so," she said, placing her hands on her hips and giving them an expression at once worried and exasperated. "What kind of danger is the world in this time, O Great Hero?"

“You look so spiffy today!”

“...Is that so?”

“It sure is!”

Guild Girl was in tremendous spirits. Even the brisk wind blowing past the checkin desk didn't bother her in the least. After all, the adventurer standing with her wore a cheap-looking but squeaky-clean metal helmet, and his leather armor was polished to a sparkle. Strangely, even his sword with its strange length and his little round shield almost looked like practical battle equipment all tidied up like this.

Granted, there were a few unpleasant dark stains still left, but... *Well, that's part of the charm, I guess!* Guild Girl thought. What made her happiest of all, though, were the looks of the adventurers who began to appear as the start time approached.

“Hey, check him out.”

“Wow, a Silver-ranked adventurer...”

“Isn't his equipment a little...ordinary?”

“Nah, it's practical!”

“Why doesn't he take his helmet off?”

“I've heard of him—that has to be Goblin Slayer...”

There was an unmistakable respect in their eyes. No doubt there was some ridicule as well. Even in his cleaner state, Goblin Slayer was hardly anyone's image of the ideal adventurer. But the respect was there—and the trust. Just clean him up a little and display the rank tag that was the proof of his accomplishments, and people's attitudes toward him visibly changed.

Maybe that was good and maybe it was bad—but to Guild Girl at that moment, it was absolutely good. When she thought of the way people had regarded him only a few years ago!

Er, although to be fair, they do still treat him like he's a little...strange.

But at least he certainly got passing marks as the adventurer-consultant to the dungeon exploration contest!

“How does it feel?” she asked, puffing out her chest with real satisfaction. “You see how much differently people treat you just because you look a little nicer?” She understood perfectly well, of course, that Goblin Slayer’s only answer would be a simple *I see* or the like. It didn’t matter. The point was that *she* was pleased by it. “I’m trying something a little different, too, not my usual uniform—it’s almost like I’m a different person, don’t you think? Heh-heh.”

She didn’t really look at him where he stood beside her as she spoke; she focused on checking the paperwork in her hands and making sure everything was in order. Thankfully, all the street stalls and participants created a buzz loud enough to prevent anyone from specifically overhearing them.

“Hrm...,” he grunted, then said only: “Your outfit appears easy to move in. So it shouldn’t cause any issues.”

“Hmm, well, yes, I suppose that’s one way of looking at it...”

No matter how detached his answer, it didn’t surprise her. Guild Girl put on her best smile and surveyed the crowd. She saw young men and women with every kind of equipment, their faces sparkling with anticipation, no thought of possible failure in their heads. Some might have derided them as stupid, but everyone had the right to at least take that first step.

Guild Girl loved seeing them filled with courage as they prepared to move forward. Particularly since they were about to embark upon her own brainchild, the dungeon exploration contest. She privately vowed that she absolutely would repay their interest.

“I have to say, we got quite a few people!”

“Indeed.”

“Hopefully this will help them learn a little something about goblin hunting, so they can do better in the—”

“They won’t learn.” His words were brusque, as always. Guild Girl gulped a little.

That was fine—perfectly fine. This didn't surprise her. She expected this sort of response.

"Lots of them aren't participating," Goblin Slayer continued. "Of those who are, many will simply quit. I don't think it will have that much effect in the long run."

That's how tutorials were. How many of the people here really and truly meant to take the experience seriously? And even those who did—being serious didn't necessarily mean you would learn any more than someone who wasn't.

Umm, which all works out to...

...that he was thinking about it quite seriously and responding in kind.

Guild Girl tapped a finger to her lips thoughtfully, then found an old story floating through her mind. "Once upon a time, there was supposedly a province that chose its fighters by pitting them all against one another in a three-day battle to the death."

"I suppose that would be the minimum necessary to make it really sink in." Certainly, it would at least be the quickest way to get the feeling into their bones.

Having learned, though, wouldn't necessarily mean they would live very long.

Goblin Slayer's words were cold; he was thinking back to his very first goblin hunt. He hadn't understood how to optimize his weapons and gear; he'd caught his sword on the wall in the confined space, been ambushed, been poisoned, and broken all his bottles. True, what he had learned from that fight unquestionably influenced his actions later on, but that one experience was not the reason he had survived.

I've been lucky over and over again. It was the only reason he could conceive of for why he had come this far. To imagine that all these novices would go on to long and successful careers because he'd put on a single contest for them...

Such a belief would be beyond childish.

Whether or not they held this event was unlikely to have much impact on

these people's futures. If anything, it was a risk to *him*; he didn't want to become the kind of shameless person who might think that any success these children experienced later was all thanks to this little thing he'd done.

"U-um..." A small voice pulled the two of them out of their thoughts. They were confronted across the desk with a diminutive figure. A black-haired girl of compact build, wearing a brown leather cap. The sword at her hip was too long for her frame, and it visibly pulled her to one side—although one might find that charming.

The way her voice cracked from nerves was potentially amusing—but they certainly mustn't laugh now. "Yes? How can I help you?" Guild Girl asked, as politely as she would of any full-fledged adventurer, but the girl fell silent in response.

After a long moment, she finally managed to come out with: "I'd...like to participate in the contest..." Her voice was almost a whisper.

Guild Girl smiled, taking out a blank checkin form and a stylus. "Are you able to write?"

"I... Yes, I can," the girl said. "Just my name. But..."

Guild Girl held the stylus out to her, and the girl took it, gripping it as tightly as if it were a sword. Then she wrote something on the registration sheet—just a single character. A whirlwind could have written more neatly.

It was her name.

The girl handed the registration sheet back, stealing anxious glances in the direction of the armored adventurer who stood beside Guild Girl. The receptionist diligently continued to smile as she took the paper and launched into her explanation. "Obstacles have been set up in the dungeon as a series of tests. Some of them are enemies; some are traps."

The girl nodded. Not distractedly; she was clearly thinking hard about what Guild Girl was saying.

"If you get through them, you'll receive proof from one of the contest facilitators. You want to get all the pieces of proof available."

“Um, all right.” Then the girl mumbled, “Proof, proof,” to herself. She was the picture of seriousness.

“This will act as evidence of your participation. It’s essentially like a rank tag, so please be careful not to lose it.” Guild Girl held out a vibrant violet-colored scarf. The girl took it, still looking nervous, then tied it awkwardly around her arm.

Suddenly, Goblin Slayer noticed something glinting in her backpack. “A lantern?”

“Oh...” The girl flinched, her body going stiff. Flustered, most likely. Maybe she thought he was upset.

“Goodness,” Guild Girl said quickly, pretending she had only just noticed it. She looked at the girl seriously: “That’s a beautiful piece of equipment. Where did you get it?”

“I, um, bought it...at the armory,” the girl replied slowly. “It’s...a brass lantern.”

“It’s good to keep your hands free while exploring,” Goblin Slayer said quietly. “Not a bad choice.”

“Oh...” The girl tugged her leather cap down over her eyes in an effort to hide the flush of simultaneous embarrassment and happiness in her cheeks. She shifted uneasily for a moment, then bowed her head and scampered off like a frightened rabbit.

Guild Girl watched her long black hair flutter in the wind as she went, then finally giggled. “There goes someone who’s not used to getting a compliment.”

“I’m not surprised.” Goblin Slayer’s helmet moved up and down. Behind his visor, he, too, was watching the girl. “Most children from poor villages—the ones who don’t stand to inherit a farm, at any rate—are like that.”

“And what were you like, Goblin Slayer?”

“Me?” He fell silent. The conversation died, replaced by the inchoate wave of sound made up of the simultaneous voices of all the assembled participants. After a long time, he said quietly: “I was...not a very good child.”

“That girl probably feels the same way about herself.”

His response was only a whisper: “You think so?”

That prompted Guild Girl to smile and nod. “Yes, I’m quite sure.”

All right, then—it was almost time for the dungeon exploration contest to begin.

§

The beating of drums seemed to rumble in the earth, eliciting a cheer from the participants. Breathless anticipation has its own pleasures, but it can also be enervating to get so worked up. That nervousness turns to excitement at the moment of catharsis; how could they do otherwise but shout?

Even when Guild Girl climbed the rostrum in front of the dungeon entrance, they didn’t settle down. She couldn’t blame them. They were about to embark on a dangerous quest (at least, they expected it to be). She studied the crowd silently, her smile never failing.

During her upbringing as a daughter of nobility, she’d been taught that silence could be the most powerful form of persuasion. It was much like how statues of the Earth Mother often depicted her with an enigmatic smile on her face; it was simply the most appropriate thing. That tactic worked for Guild Girl now: The silence gradually rippled out from her like a wave.

The adventurers gathered under the cold sky started feeling awkward, then finally looked at one another and shut their mouths. Satisfied, Guild Girl began to speak as dispassionately as the armored adventurer beside her. “Ten thousand gold coins and the permanent leadership of a frontier town to anyone who so much as survives this poison-fanged dungeon...”

The crowd *ooh’d*. The stares grew more intense.

“...is something we certainly can’t offer you, I’m afraid,” Guild Girl said, snickering. The rising anticipation abandoned the crowd like a puff of air.

She thought that was good. Nervous excitement was important. But having the wind taken out of your sails was likewise meaningful—at least in adventuring.

“However, we do have prizes for those who successfully complete the contest, so I hope you’ll all do your best out there!” she said. That would help motivate and interest them again. After that, there was some simple housekeeping to take care of. It didn’t do any good to insist that what you were about to say was important or critical; no one would listen to you. You had to get them interested, and then they would want to listen to you of their own accord. “What you’ll be doing is this: entering the dungeon, overcoming the obstacles, finding a series of gemstones, and then getting safely back out the exit.”

That was the whole story. The sort of spoils that would normally reward dungeon exploration would here be the proof that the trials had been completed.

Perhaps they would be wondering what those trials were. *But I can hardly tell them that!*

Whispering had started among the crowd, and there were a few questions about what they would find in the ruins, but Guild Girl didn’t answer them. Instead, she kept smiling and said, “If you hit any real trouble, one of the facilitators will be along to help you out, so please don’t worry about that.”

The contest facilitators were all experienced adventurers. Like that man in the cheap-looking but well-used helmet standing beside Guild Girl. It bore no obvious grime, but yes, he certainly did look the part of a Silver-ranked adventurer. Judging by the lightness of his equipment, maybe he was a scout? No, he had too much gear for that. But he didn’t seem like a warrior, either. His weapon was too cheap.

The collective gaze looking up at them was one of confusion, but, well, that was okay.

“.....” Goblin Slayer said nothing. He was doing exactly as Guild Girl had asked of him: *“Just stand quietly beside me, okay?”*

He’d never been the type to become garrulous in front of a crowd anyway. Not that such situations specifically bothered him, either.

“All right,” Guild Girl went on, “I’m going to read off your names. Please enter the dungeon in the order I call you!”

She read a name, and a young man came sprinting forward, exclaiming, “That’s me; I’m first!” He was probably feeling nervous, but his gait was carefree, and he looked courageous. Adventurers could have no truck with cowardice, after all. Care and caution they needed, but if one lacked the conviction to go diving into the unknown, then one had no future in this line of work.

From that perspective...

“Everyone who even participates here has already proved themselves on one level.” High Elf Archer’s ears were too good to miss the footsteps of that first challenger or indeed the drumbeat pounding beneath them.

Inside the dungeon, the adventurers at their various stations all looked at one another and nodded. Along with the wizards and their goblins, Dwarf Shaman and Lizard Priest were there, ready as they would ever be.

“You just be careful, eh?” High Elf Archer grinned and bopped Lizard Priest on the shoulder. “Don’t go accidentally getting yourself slain.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha—a dragon in a cave, my goodness. Something the inexperienced would never expect, I can only think!” He opened his huge jaws and laughed uproariously. His little joke helped put the others at ease as well. Even the event facilitators could get nervous. Why shouldn’t they? They were supposed to already know what they were doing—they would have to look good doing it, and they couldn’t make any mistakes.

“And how about you? Think we’d get more takers if you’d stand out there *with your mouth shut.*” Despite the gravity of the occasion, Dwarf Shaman took a great gulp of wine, then gave a teasing chuckle. “Even Beard-cutter’s managing that much.”

“Don’t lump me in with that oddball.” High Elf Archer was, of course, used to this. She simply snorted and refused to have anything more to do with the dwarf. High elves attracted attention wherever they went, whether they wanted to or not. *Anyway, he’s the one who got all the responsibility this time, so it’s only fair to let him have the spotlight, I’d say.*

“You’ve only just arrived in town recently, right? It’s gonna be a tough adjustment.”

“Er, yeah...”

Over in the corner with her arms crossed was another elf adventurer, who seemed surprised to find High Elf Archer talking to her. She nodded uncertainly—she’d only just registered with the Guild recently, and maybe she wasn’t used to this yet. Granted, an elf outside the forest was almost guaranteed to be, as it were, a fish out of water. Her party member beside her, a female spell caster, was grinning and talking to her, though, so she was probably fine.

Excellent. A Guild employee stationed inside the ruins clapped as if she’d been waiting for this moment and said: “All right, everyone, could you take your places, please?” The woman had the symbol of the Supreme God, the sword and scales, hanging from her neck—it was Inspector. Now she looked around at everyone and nodded. “Guild employees will be making the rounds periodically. If anything comes up, please be sure to let one of them know.”

“Not like we held back much.” The rough voice belonged to an adventurer wielding an ax. High Elf Archer didn’t much bother to remember other people’s jobs, but she seemed to recall he had been involved with setting up traps.

He sounded prickly, but Inspector simply smiled and replied, “Of course. Be careful, though—some of the kids might be relaxing in between tests.”

“Yeah, good point. I guess so. All right, I get you. I understand.” Having been charged with this particular responsibility, he didn’t seem like he was going to be a bad influence on the adventurer hopefuls.

In other words, everyone here is a full-fledged, outstanding adventurer. The thought made High Elf Archer happy somehow, her long ears twitching.

Beside her, Priestess clutched her sounding staff, still looking nervous—maybe she’d noticed it, too. She had genuinely advanced along the path, but she was still a touch timid. She’d gotten good at handling the details but chose the oddest times to be self-deprecating.

I guess that’s humans for you, High Elf Archer thought. Even the elders of the elves, who had been around since the Age of the Gods, couldn’t fathom them. Those old elves seemed to respect rheas in particular, but the humans were no slouches, either.

People of a great many different races were here to participate in the contest today, but the majority were human. *Us “experienced” types better give them a good example to follow.*

That meant no special consideration but also enabling the rookies to enjoy adventuring—yet not making it easy on them.

“All right, everyone, let’s welcome them to the gauntlet!”

§

And indeed, a gauntlet it was.

“Yikes?! Owwww!”

The first young man to come dashing into the dungeon took a board to the face; it had been balanced on the floor right where he stepped.

He dropped into a crouch; his nose hurt so bad that he feared it was broken. He probably didn’t realize that he was immensely fortunate. Had that board been rigged with a spike, as such traps often were, he would’ve been skewered by now, reduced to a corpse.

He looked pathetic, plodding forward rubbing his red nose, but pain is one way of learning. Take the young woman who entered the ruins sometime later; by sheer fortune, she avoided the first trap...

“Eek?!”

...only to stick her foot in a hole, get it stuck between some boards, and pitch forward onto her face. In a second, her brand-new equipment and clothes were covered in dirt. That’s what happened to anything you wore to go adventuring.

“Er, ah, my sword... Where’s my sword...?!”

On top of her dirtied equipment, the fall had made her lose her grip on her weapon; she began to grope around looking for it. She was just lucky that she was still at the mouth of the ruins, where there was some faint light, so she hadn’t yet lit the lantern in her backpack.

Even a torch will go out, if you drop it. A lantern can simply break. And darkness is a human’s enemy. Meanwhile, being on all fours with her rump sticking out made her completely vulnerable to any monsters that happened

along. One more reason she was lucky her spill came right at the entrance.

Still, a trap like this should have been simple enough for any young hunter, or an elf, to avoid. Most elves had the abilities of rangers, plus they could see in the dark and were light of foot. That only applied, though, to elves born and raised in the forest. A half-elf raised in a human town might be a bit nimbler than the average human—but not by much.

On the other hand, there wasn't much trouble overcoming the physical obstacles—at least among the humans. Many of them were the second or third sons of farmers or of some other similar background. Running among the fields and hills was familiar to them, even if they were doing it with a bit more armor now.

"I—I can't reach...!"

The dwarves and the rheas, however, along with any other diminutive creatures, had their work cut out for them. They might have an affinity with animals, but that didn't mean they were good at climbing trees.

One such clung close, kicked off with her back leg, then scrambled up the obstacle, finally cresting it...

"Eeyikes!"

...only to find her balance thrown off by the unfamiliar movement.

"Here, grab on!"

"Th-thanks. You saved me...!"

At the last moment, she was held up by another participant, who had worked his way back over the trap to help her.

It wasn't as if there would be only a single winner of this contest. Some people did lend a hand to those who needed it. That wasn't against the rules, either—in this event, it was a real advantage.

It was said that even amateurs could be like unto the God of Knowledge if three of them got together. Although, of course, sometimes you wound up with three idiots, and they didn't get much of anywhere.

"Hmph..." That was probably the thinking of those who snorted and laughed

to themselves and went on ahead alone, ignoring the small groups of other participants. Perhaps others regarded these sneerers as arrogant. But maybe they *were* able to get through the contest on their own. The only way to find out was to try.

It was always an adventurer's prerogative to make their own choices. Whatever result they arrived at, it was theirs alone.

"Heh-heh. You've done good."

The first of those results was likely to stop the participants in their tracks. After they had gotten past a number of traps, a figure emerged soundlessly from among the rocks. It was a high elf woman, a creature of otherworldly beauty. She would smile at the young men and young women, then take their hands in her own long, pale fingers. That set the young men—and even a few of the young women—back on their heels, but the elf woman didn't seem to notice.

"Here you go. The first one!"

A bit of gemstone, no larger than the fingernail on their pinky, would be dropped into their palm. If they looked at it in the flickering light of their torches, they could probably discern that it was a sapphire.

A little something we picked up on our last adventure, High Elf Archer thought. The Guild had bought it from them and was now using it as a reward for these participants. This was possible because, as Dwarf Shaman had guessed, the gems they'd found weren't actually that valuable. But if they didn't say that to the participants, they weren't likely to know. All they would see would be a glittering gemstone dropped into their hand by a high elf—it would catch their attention immediately.

High Elf Archer's heart warmed to see a young girl slip the gem carefully into a pouch at her hip, laughing shyly as she did. She understood very well that value was relative. Each person decided for themselves what was valuable, and no one else could make that decision for them.

Then the participants would proceed farther, ever farther, into the ruins.

Most of them screeched to a halt again when another figure melted out of

the shadows: Dwarf Shaman, exclaiming, “All right, lads and lasses, time for a riddle!” With his long white beard and the wine jug ever present in his hand, he looked like a wizard out of a storybook. As such, should they anger him, he might turn them into a frog or transport them into a block of stone or blow them clear out of this dungeon...

Most of those whose only experience of magicians came from fairy tales and old poems froze with fear. They would tremble, they would swallow audibly, and Dwarf Shaman would simply laugh aloud and wave a hand. “Adventuring isn’t just swinging yer weapon around, see, kiddos. You’ve got to use your head sometimes, too.”

Hence the riddle.

Dwarf Shaman’s riddles didn’t demand any unusual intelligence to answer. They were mostly in the vein of *Guess how heavy that statue is* or *Guess how many boxes are in this nested box*—that sort of thing. If the would-be adventurers could calm down and think clearly, the answers would come to them fairly easily.

The groups would put their heads together, desperately trying to figure out the response:

“H-hey. How are we supposed to know how heavy that thing is?”

“Well, uh, hold on, hold on. He said you take half the weight of a typical human and add it to...”

“So, uh...”

One, two. Some counted on their fingers—the only way they could hope to arrive at an answer. Most people managed to get past the physical traps all right, but more than a few were beached here. Some turned back dejectedly; others simply gave up and pressed forward, but...

“I got it!”

...one girl lit up as she came up with the answer, though it had taken her quite a bit of time.

“Ha, excellent!”

She almost panicked again as she tried to catch the sliver of emerald Dwarf Shaman tossed to her. She wiped at her forehead—thinking made her sweat almost as much as physical exertion—and tucked the emerald into her bag so she wouldn't lose it before continuing on.

The ruins were deep; the contest continued.

More such traps and riddles awaited the participants. If you wonder whether tests of wits are any less demanding than duels with the sword, the answer is certainly not. But by the same token, an excess of intelligence won't make up for a complete lack of martial skill. The world is full of tests of luck, too, like kissing a series of cultic statues in the right order. And indeed, if you adventure long enough, you'll eventually encounter a situation where sheer, unmitigated violence is the only solution.

It's challenges like these that reveal an adventurer's true worth.

What it comes down to is: Getting past a few traps and answering some riddles isn't everything. For every would-be adventurer knows that there are *other* things lurking in ruins, dungeons, and caves. Things like...

"GROOROGBB...!"

...goblins.

Several hideous little creatures approached, their movements stilted, like puppets. They might not have seemed terribly threatening to those with a few adventures under their belts, but for the uninitiated, it was very different. Though they might be known as the weakest of monsters, facing them down all by oneself was a frightening prospect.

The black-haired girl was certainly scared. Awkwardly, she pulled out her sword, which was much too long for her. She was even less able to support its weight in her hands than on her hip; it looked more like she was hanging from the sword than the other way around.

"GBBRG...!"

"GOROOGGB!!"

"Ergh..." The girl took a step back, but the next second, she exclaimed, "Yah!"

and swung her blade. Maybe she'd done some training, but nonetheless it was a big, wild swing that made it look as if the sword might pull her clear off her feet.

Luckily for her, the halls of the ruins were wide, so the sword didn't strike against them, but neither did it reach the goblins. There was a great *whoosh* as the sword swept through the air, and the girl pitched forward, stumbling a step or two. The goblins hadn't specifically dodged her; she'd simply missed them—but this was no way to go about things.

Blushing with fear and excitement and embarrassment, the girl sucked in a breath, then took another big step forward. “Hi...yah!”

The stroke was too amateurish to be a proper combo strike; it was just one swing after another. But the sword was nothing if not robust, and this time it caught one of the diminutive goblins. The blade bit heavily into the monster's shoulder, cleaving it down to the chest and sending dark blood flying.

“GORGGGBB?!” the creature howled—but the wound was really too shallow to be fatal. This goblin, though, was a puppet created with magic; it had no autonomy, no soul, not even actual life. Any slight injury was considered the same as death for it, and it promptly crumpled. Gobs of froth and spittle covered the floor, and soon the creature didn't look like a goblin at all anymore.

“I did it!” the girl cried, but the fact that she allowed herself to be distracted in this moment was testament to the fact that she was still new at this.

“GROOGB!!”

“Eeek!”

It was more than one goblin she had encountered, and the fight wasn't over yet.

Another goblin jumped over the corpse, slamming into her chest. She took a spectacular fall backward, grunting with the pain. It wasn't that it hurt so much. It was more that the chill on her behind and the slimy feeling on her legs were unpleasant.

“You little...!” She got unsteadily to her feet and let loose another big swing. *Whoosh, whoosh*—at least it *sounded* mean.



Even goblins, though—even puppet goblins—weren't going to be hit by attacks like that. They simply jumped out of the way, *sproing, sproing*, the girl's face getting grimmer and grimmer. Starting to get frustrated, she swung harder, the blade smacking into the rock with a *shiing*; she could feel the vibrations in her hands.

"*You little...!!*" Properly angry now, she charged at them, thrusting with her sword. It was a poor stab. Yet, even so, the girl's long legs and arms, combined with the long sword, managed to bridge the gap between her and the enemy. The goblin was planning to hop backward again, but instead, the blade tore into his neck.

"Oh...!" The girl's previously flat look turned into one of happiness. She was sure that the squelching feel of goop collapsing under her blade meant the end of that enemy.

In that instant, she was focused only on the goblin in front of her. Naturally, she wasn't preparing for another attack.

"Wah—hrpf?!"

She found her vision going dark. Her mind went blank. Nothingness. She stopped moving, of course. She couldn't do anything at all.

She felt a weight on her back, *thump*, and was driven to the ground. She landed on her chest, a shout escaping her lips. She couldn't breathe. So heavy. Suffocating.

"GOROOOGOBB!!"

A goblin...?!

She realized belatedly that one of them had jumped on her from behind, pulling down her leather cap. She felt the damp floor. The goop that had once been a goblin sprayed up, splattering her face, making her clothing filthy. She hated that—even though she'd already fallen and dirtied herself once.

"Oh, ohh... Hrrr... Ohhh...!!"

The sounds the girl made were hardly real screams; they were something more like a sobbing child. She shook her head hard and flailed her body, trying

desperately to throw off the weight on her back.

It hadn't been her plan to slam into the wall—just sheer luck.

“GROBG?!”

“Ah...!”

She heard the monster yell and felt his grip loosen; she immediately scrambled away. She didn't have one second to think about it. She was struggling for breath, but fighting was more important than breathing right now.

She straightened her cap, but her vision was still dim. Her lantern must have gone out. She reached out blindly, and by good fortune, her scrabbling fingers found the sword she'd dropped when she fell.

“Yah...! You little...! Stinking!!”

Holding the sword in a reverse grip, the girl lashed out with all the subtlety of a hammer. One stab didn't do it; the creature didn't go down, so she stabbed twice, then three times, and finally let the sword drop.

“Phew... Hoo... Hrnn... Hngh!”

It would take time for it to disappear, and anyway, it wasn't likely to move again after the thrashing she'd given it. The girl tried to steady her breathing, her small chest heaving up and down, and then she pulled the stopper out of her waterskin. She drank noisily (must mind her supply!) and finally let out a breath.

Then she had a chance to relight the lantern, extinguished during the fighting. Thank goodness it wasn't broken.

“Huh?!”

Blinking in the renewed illumination, the girl realized there was something wrong with the small bag at her hip.

The mouth is open...!

She felt cold all over, as if the blood had drained from every part of her body at once. She grabbed the bag and turned it upside down over her palm. Nothing

came out.

“No way...! But how?!” She scrambled around on all fours, scratching in the dirt, almost in tears. She’d worked so hard to collect those stones, and now they were all simply gone. It wasn’t sadness that brought the tears to her eyes but agony and anger at how pathetic she was.

And yet, the fighting had taken place over a relatively small area. It was simple enough to spot the sparkling gems among the dull rocks of the ruins.

“Let’s see... The sapphire, the emerald...” One, two. She collected them in her hand and counted them, then put them carefully away. She rubbed her face with her sleeve, wiping off tears and sweat and goop and gore, and got her breathing under control again. “Just one more...I think.”

Where is it? Had it rolled away into some dark corner? As the girl looked around, scanning the area, she noticed a narrow space near the wall. Just the kind of place a stray gem might have ended up.

“Maybe it’s here...” *Hrrm, huh.* Using every ounce of strength in her small body, the girl reached into the crevice...“Yikes!”...and then tumbled clear into it.

What she’d taken to be a crack or a seam in the wall had, apparently, been a door.

Dumped unceremoniously into a dark hallway, the girl vehemently threw her cap on the ground. *It’s this heavy thing that makes me keep falling,* she thought. She snorted, disentangling herself from her backpack, then brought her lantern to bear. She saw something glimmer in the wavering light. “There it is!”

A tiny shard of diamond glittered near the wall. She trotted over and picked it up, then put it carefully in her bag. This time she closed it extra tightly so the stones wouldn’t escape again. Now she was okay. She had them all back. She hadn’t dropped anything else, nor had she forgotten anything.

“Oh, uh, my sword...!” She quickly gathered up the sword she’d tossed on the ground in her rush to get the diamond and awkwardly slid it back into its scabbard.

That’s everything. Now I’m really ready.

“Okay... Let’s go!” She clenched her fist, checked to make sure the scabbard was secure at her side, and tugged the bag full of gemstones shut one more time. When she set off down the hallway, it was with careful steps—but courageous ones. Wherever she’d been meaning to go, she was all turned around now.

Behind her, the door in the wall closed without a sound.

§

“Ahhhhh...?!”

A group of young people were beating feet, all but throwing aside their swords, shields, and other possessions. From behind them came the clacking footsteps of a walking, armed skeleton warrior.

The young people had managed to make it past the goblins, but here their courage seemed to have finally failed them. Demonstrating what it meant to run headlong, they sprinted down the hallways, running, running. They, of course, didn’t notice Guild Girl watching them from one end of the hall, smiling to herself...

“Heek?!” A young woman who looked like a servant of the Valkyrie gave a cry that made her sound much younger than she was when she saw the living suit of armor standing beside Guild Girl. The young woman went scrambling in what could only be called an unladylike manner, almost stumbling over herself in her haste to escape.

“You can polish it to a shine, but you do still startle people.” Guild Girl watched the shouting girl, the armor padding around her butt clearly evident, flee the scene, and sighed wistfully. “At least I think you looked rather heroic in the sunlight outside.”

“Nothing we can do about it,” Goblin Slayer said, unbothered. “I can’t wear perfume like you.”

“Goodness...” Guild Girl’s eyes widened. Then she realized that of course he would notice such a thing, and her face softened into a smile. *You have to be sensitive to smells in a cave*, she thought. She was grateful that the ruins were dark and that the orange light of the torch hid the flush in her cheeks.

Guided by Goblin Slayer, with his shield secured to his left arm and a torch in his hand, Guild Girl went deeper into the maze. At the head of their group clacked the Dragontooth Warrior, returning to its original position. The way it looked somehow downhearted despite having fulfilled its job—was that because of the small spark of spirit still left in it, or was it the work of the spell user?

“You said you wanted something other than goblins, so I had this Dragontooth Warrior made up...”

“I guess maybe it is a little much.”

“Yes: Goblins are living things, but skeleton warriors are not.” Surprise and then fear would be the first things people would experience; convinced they could never defeat the thing, they would flee.

It would be easy to ridicule such behavior as foolish or cowardly, even if it was genuinely the right thing to do. It would also be all too simple to praise such actions as evidence of intelligent thinking or maturity. One who lived could always fight another day—but an adventurer who never took any risks would never learn or grow.

This fact seemed self-evident. What was more, goblins were the weakest monsters in the Four-Cornered World. Any warrior should be able to kill them. A scout could sneak past them, and a spell user could use their intellect to prevail. In other words, simply besting some goblins left something to be desired as an adventurer. Even for the man who walked beside her, who had made his Silver rank on hunting these creatures.

Or perhaps that was exactly what made him the adventurer he was. Anyway, if these kids were going to turn tail and run just because they’d seen a skeleton or a suit of armor...

“Well, this is our very first time doing this,” came a voice. “Whatever the truth be, we wouldn’t want people thinking we were too harsh.” A long head emerged from one of the inner chambers—what would those young adventurer hopefuls think if they saw Lizard Priest? Guild Girl smiled at the thought and bowed to him.

“Nice work on that skeleton. How are you doing?”

“Tolerably.” Lizard Priest rolled his eyes in his head, then looked up at the ceiling as if in thought. “Some of them judge that they have, say, a one-in-six chance of victory and do take the challenge, so I am hardly disappointed.”

“If this leaves them thinking they don’t have the chops, though, that would be a problem in itself...”

“Some sifting is necessary. If this is enough to break their nerve, then better they run from us than from something worse.”

What a very lizardman-like perspective. They prized survival above all else, and while they didn’t hesitate to retreat, it was never a sign of cowardice. Withdrawal in hopes that you might conserve your life for some higher purpose was a very different thing from simply running with your tail between your legs.

But still... Guild Girl was human, and most humans had never met a lizardman. She couldn’t follow everything he thought, and anyway, she couldn’t help thinking what a problem it would be if they never got another novice.

“Having said that, youth needs more than fear and trembling to cultivate it.”

Thus, she wasn’t surprised by the next words to emerge from those great jaws. Guild Girl certainly agreed with him—but Goblin Slayer said, “Is that so?” and shook his helmeted head.

“‘There are diamonds among the dirt,’ they say,” Guild Girl replied, nodding. Sometimes the severe noble upbringing she’d had from her mother and father when she was young turned out to be useful. She’d completely ignored that proverb when she was first told about it, but now... “If you whittle down their number too much, the number of diamonds will go down, too. Although strangely, a lot of people seem to think the number of diamonds can only go up...”

“Yes, even so. Crack an egg too early and all you get is a yolk. The shell should only be broken at birth.” Each may be best for a different kind of military service, after all. After adding this in a whisper, Lizard Priest went on: “The elves, I am told, say that those who trim the buds of the tree to help it grow are fools.”

“That makes sense.” Goblin Slayer nodded. It was a very elf-ish thing to say,

given how they regarded each branch as being as precious as a bone of their own bodies. “Perhaps I should think about this as well?” He grunted softly, then crossed his arms in thought. Not that they could see his expression behind his visor. “I think my teacher might have been considered somewhat severe by society’s standards.”

“Ah, each has their own way of doing things. Milord Goblin Slayer, you seem to be doing quite well. There is no need for you to change.”

“Is that so?”

“I should say.” Lizard Priest stretched out his neck pointedly, then looked into the chamber.

Oh, for goodness’ sake... Guild Girl sighed hopelessly. There was no question she had a few things to say about Goblin Slayer’s teaching methods, but still...

“Um, I’m done tending to these people. Who is next...?”

“Hmm. That one over there, I believe. It seems he’s hit his head...”

“Stay still, please. There you go; it’ll be all right.”

When Guild Girl saw Priestess zipping around at the instructions of a bald-pated monk, all her complaints vanished. They were at a sort of first-aid station for those who had been hurt or had become unable to move during the competition. They were laid out on fur blankets or seated carefully, Priestess moving among them, helping where she could. She was well trained. She worked hard—whatever she herself might think. She was like a different person from that day when she’d stood nervously in front of the reception desk.

Guild Girl kept those feelings in her heart as she called out, “Excellent work!” sounding bright as ever. “How’s it going over here?”

“Good—nobody seems in any danger of dying, so I think we’re okay!” All right, so maybe it wasn’t *great* that she could say something like that with a big smile on her face. Without quite meaning to, Guild Girl stole a glance at the helmeted head beside her.

“Um, this person, they bumped their head on the ceiling trying to squeeze in somewhere a little too tight...”

“And this one couldn’t see his feet because of the helmet he was wearing!” The monk chuckled. “He slipped and hurt his back.” He firmly applied a bandage to a young man lying nearby. The boy thrashed and opened his mouth in a voiceless scream, but even so, it was clear that his injuries weren’t that severe. The monk laughed again: “Ha-ha—this here, it hardly counts as a wound. Not even any internal injuries.”

“That’s good,” Guild Girl said with a smile. She hoped the boy wouldn’t be so traumatized by this experience that he didn’t try adventuring again. But still—had there been any spaces tight enough for someone to bump their head...?

“...Hrm.” Goblin Slayer, meanwhile, gave a low grunt. He fired off a volley of questions at Lizard Priest, then turned toward those recuperating at the first-aid station.

“Are you looking for someone?” Priestess asked, trotting up and looking like a little bird.

“No,” Goblin Slayer said and shook his head. “Things seem to be in good hands here.”

“Hee-hee,” Guild Girl chuckled, smiling to herself. Priestess didn’t quite seem to catch the import of Goblin Slayer’s words, but Guild Girl thought she did.

This was a good thing.

People who had messed up, people who had been injured, people with good prospects. There were so many of them here. She hoped things went well. Everything. All of it. For him, too. Yes, all of it...

“*Huh?*” Suddenly, there came a very displeased voice. Guild Girl looked over to see an ax-wielding warrior scratching his head beside a thoroughly exasperated warlock. She recognized him as the leader of one of the parties that was helping out behind the scenes. “I’m sorry, Miss Receptionist,” the axman said, “but I think we might have a problem on our hands.”

“...Again?”

“‘Again’?”

“I’m sorry—it’s nothing.” Guild Girl waved the comment away and fixed the

smile on her face, wishing she could wave away those unpleasant memories of the past as easily.

She couldn't simply forget all the trouble at the harvest festival. *Not that it was their fault, of course...* But it had been a problem, all right. No question.

She gave the warrior a serious look and asked, "What's happened?"

"Our scout found something unusual."

"Unusual?"

"Yeah." The man nodded; his next words escaped him in a sort of groan: "A goblin corpse."

An almost mechanical voice demanded: "Where?"

§

"Here."

The hurried scraping of metal equipment through the halls was greeted by an elf woman standing in a corner of the maze. She melded with the darkness, virtually invisible even in the flickering torchlight. Goblin Slayer, walking at the head of the column of adventurers, was silent for a moment, then nodded. "You?" he asked.

Hoh. The elf scout, redolent with the odors of face powder and perfume, widened her eyes, but then her lips softened toward a smile. "Better believe it." A red tongue formed the words in the darkness of her mouth. "I was the one who found it."

Just as she'd said, there was a goblin corpse resting in a pool of blood at her feet. Goblin Slayer squatted beside it without a word; Priestess quickly held up a torch for him. Goblin Slayer searched through his bag, produced a dagger that looked like a cat's claw, and began an impromptu dissection.

"It looks like it's been stabbed, repeatedly..." Priestess said hesitantly.

"Yes, but that doesn't mean it's dead," Goblin Slayer replied, shaking his head. "Rookies do that sometimes. Miss the vital points."

In other words, one of the participants in the competition fought with the

goblin...

That didn't specifically seem like so much of a problem, but Priestess put a finger to her lips and pondered. Something was off. Something didn't feel right; the hairs on the back of her neck were standing up.

"...So there's a dead goblin; so what? Nothing unusual about that." The axman was trying hard not to look at the ongoing autopsy; he appeared a bit queasy. "We summoned them to be enemies in here, after all."

How thoroughly uncomprehending. The warlock woman sighed as if she wished for nothing more than to go straight home. "They aren't summoned. I'm *making* them."

"Same difference."

"It's *completely* different!"

It really was different. Warlock added angrily that she'd explained this already, but it seemed to go clear over Axman's head.

He had at least this much in common with Goblin Slayer: Neither of them was deeply interested in the mechanics of spells. Goblin Slayer stood up, his dissection finished, and promptly asked the warlock what he felt to be the most important question: "Do they leave corpses?"

"In a sense, yeah." She held out her hand; Goblin Slayer passed her the cat's claw. Warlock took the surgical knife with an experienced air and plunged it into a spreading pool of goo on the floor near them. She stirred the bubbling stuff for a moment, then, finally finding what she was looking for, withdrew the blade. Impaled on the end was a small, grimy, mostly dissolved tooth.

"This is the corpse. The goblin tooth I used for a catalyst—not enough left to do anything with it now."

"So you're saying..."

Ah, that's right. The feeling that something was off wasn't so trivial after all.

They *did* leave corpses. This goblin's body, and this one alone. Meaning it had been real...

"Goblins," Goblin Slayer grunted quietly. The softness of his voice, and the

visor between it and the world, made it hard to hear what he said next. But those who had been with him a long time, who had spoken with him often, knew. He spat venomously: “The little bastards.”

Priestess and Guild Girl looked at each other, agape. He so rarely cursed.

Guild Girl decided to try putting business first, although her voice squeaked as she spoke. “Does that mean goblins got in here somehow?” She glanced in the direction of the polished helmet, trying to grasp the situation.

“Wouldn’t say so,” the elf woman interjected, her lips forming a smile. She stretched in a way that made her resemble a great cat, then tapped on the walls of the ruins. “Not somehow. *This* is how.”

There was a *clack*, and a hidden door opened. There was only darkness beyond, stretching into the distance; they were hit with a gust of cold wind. Subterranean air that had been trapped there for centuries, even millennia, came to them. The odor was absolutely, completely new to Guild Girl.

“Can’t believe you actually found that,” Warlock said.

“Ha, that’s a scout at work,” the elf said, smirking. “Dwarves aren’t the only ones who can find things underground.”

“...Yeah, great.” Guild Girl sympathized with the annoyance in Warlock’s tone—in fact, it was more than that. It was like the floor was falling out from underneath her—so this was what it meant to feel your blood run cold.

This is very, very bad.

They were looking into an uncharted part of the ruins. This meant failure to sufficiently investigate prior to the event. Dereliction of duty resulting in risk. Responsibility. What if someone had gotten hurt already? Her head started to spin, but Guild Girl slapped her cheeks and shook her head, knowing it would do no good to get swept away.

Now wasn’t the time.

What should they do? That was what she had to think about. They had to deal with the most important things, the most critical things, first, and they had to do it quickly. Questions of responsibility could come later. They could

investigate later. Do whatever they wanted to her later.

But right now, I have to deal with this!

The dungeon exploration contest had been, it was said, first proposed by a villainous governor, with death an assumption. It wasn't simply the cruel whim of a nobleman. It had been a genuine competition, staged yearly and enjoyed by both the adventurers and the people. But this was different. This was just a game. People might get hurt, but no one was supposed to die. As long as there were no real monsters involved...

Goblins were the weakest monsters. Yes, they were the weakest *monsters*. Anyone who was too wary of them, anyone who recoiled at the sight of them, was hardly cut out to be an adventurer. Adventurers had to deal with gigantic slimes, demons, trolls, and sometimes even dragons.

But weak or not, goblins were still monsters. For someone who was not an adventurer, not a soldier, to suddenly be told, "Okay, go kill a goblin!" was asking quite a lot. If it were that easy, one would have to wonder why adventurers existed, why the Adventurers Guild existed.

Maybe...we have to stop the event...

She would rush a message to Inspector, who was overseeing the entrance at that moment. Tell her to hold the participants who hadn't yet entered the dungeon. Then the adventurers in here would be sent to find the remaining participants and escort them safely out. Then, of course, they would have to sweep the ruins again and hunt down the goblins...

That would be the best solution. Guild Girl started doing some calculations in her mind. They had a whole troop of experienced adventurers on hand, from Axman to Heavy Warrior and his party. Whatever waited for them beyond this door, they would be able to handle it. But the first thing to do—the first thing was...

"No." Guild Girl's thoughts were interrupted by a single, sharp word. "We will continue the dungeon exploration contest." The speaker was brusque, decisive, and so brief as to be almost cold.

"Wha...?" Guild Girl looked up suddenly, causing her braid to bob. In front of

her, she saw Goblin Slayer gazing straight down the dark hallway.

“We can’t let the participants know. But we do need to ensure things end safely.” He grunted softly, then said as if it were no big deal, “We can’t spare anyone to explore. I’ll go myself.”

“Are you quite certain that’s a good idea?” Lizard Priest asked, almost sounding pleased.

“Of course,” Goblin Slayer replied. “It’s an excellent idea.”

Well! It was the first time Priestess had ever heard him speak this way, or even Guild Girl, who had known him longer than Priestess had. Maybe even Cow Girl, his old friend, had never heard him quite like this.

It was absurd. Illogical, dangerous, utterly uncertain, a choice this man ought never to have made. A Silver-ranked adventurer like him should have understood that perfectly well.

Which meant, in other words, that at this moment...

“You think I’m going to let those goblins do what they want?”

...he was being selfish.

“——...” Guild Girl took a deep breath of the dusty air and slowly let it out. *Guess there’s nothing to do about it, then,* she thought.

Mixing professional and personal lives. Dereliction of duty resulting in risk. Questions of responsibility. The words danced through her head, but she swept them all away.

They would do something about it.

She would do something about it.

If this person was willing to go so far for her, then she knew what she had to do. “All right, let’s go with that, then!” She smiled and spoke before any of the other adventurers could say anything. She said it with a clap of her hands, light but decisive, as if suggesting they should all break for tea.

The person in charge had made a decision. She was acting. She was giving instructions. That was all it took to dispel the spreading unease among the

adventurers.

“The first thing is obviously that we have to get word to the people outside as well as the other facilitators to let them know what’s going on.”

Lizard Priest was quick to speak up: “I suggest we may wish to prepare to do more first aid.” Thankfully, he seemed quick to grasp Guild Girl’s thinking. It was charming, the way he sometimes looked at the ceiling as if lost in thought. And she was nothing but thankful for the accompaniment of the Dragontooth Warrior.

“It’d be bad news if there turned out to be any other hidden doors that went deeper into the maze,” Axman said, tapping on various places in the wall.

“Let’s put up a rope to indicate the correct path,” Guild Girl added.

“If they go off the path, that’s their own fault,” Warlock said as her companion continued checking the wall. “They have no one to blame but themselves.”

“Unfortunately, civil servants can’t fall back on that kind of excuse,” Guild Girl commented with a slight smile.

“What a pain,” Warlock grumbled under her breath. Nonetheless, when the elf scout and the rest pulled out some rope and started marking off the hallway, Warlock helped them, for which Guild Girl was grateful.

The point is, we have to do what we can, and we have to do it quickly. That was best. Great ideas that came too late were no help at all. Which meant next came...

“The quest,” Guild Girl said; she nodded, coughed, and then stood in front of one of the adventurers. He was staring fixedly down the hidden hallway; his helmet turned slowly to look at her. Of course she couldn’t see his eyes, concealed behind his visor. But Guild Girl looked straight into them anyway. “All right, Goblin Slayer, sir. I’m asking you, as a formal quest, to investigate this hallway and slay any goblins.”

“Yes.”

“Further, if there are any participants lost in there, I want you to rescue

them!”

“Understood.”

Each time, he answered almost as soon as she had spoken.

She’d had many conversations like this with him since he’d registered with the Adventurers Guild. Somehow it made her happy, and despite the circumstances, she found herself starting to smile.

No, no—control yourself.

“Let’s see, that just leaves...the reward, right? We’ll calculate the exact amount later, but, um...”

Payment in advance. Payment in advance. I’ll have to pay in advance. Support for necessary expenses. Let’s go with that.

Guild Girl searched in a pouch tied at her hip containing various items she’d thought might be necessary. Her fingers brushed perfume, potion bottles, and her ribbon, and she began blushing as she struggled to find what she was looking for. *Oh, for...!* Finally, she pulled the pouch clean off her hip and simply handed the entire thing to Goblin Slayer. “Take this, please! Think of it as a down payment!”

“...” Goblin Slayer didn’t say anything.

“I don’t know how much help it’ll be to you, but...!” Guild Girl added, trying to cover for herself. It was a bit like when a princess offers a knight some personal effect of hers to keep him safe as he sets off on a journey—well, okay, it was nothing as elegant as that. Besides, Guild Girl certainly didn’t intend it that way. The moment the idea flitted through her head, though...

She couldn’t have him misunderstanding. She couldn’t have him getting any weird ideas. This was a purely professional matter. But she *did* want him to come back safely. And she wanted him to trust her to handle things here. He had the good grace to count on her, and she wanted him to see that she could be counted on.

She choked back those feelings, though, buried them deep in her heart, and with a sort of *splish*, they disappeared.

When he said, “All right,” her heart skipped a beat, and she let out a breath of relief. “That will help.” He took the belt and the pouch, tried it on a couple of times, then finally simply slung it over his shoulder. Relieved by his businesslike demeanor, Guild Girl reached out and helped make sure the belt was secure.

“Um...” This single small sound came from Priestess as the other adventurers started getting into high gear. “Are you going to be all right alone...?” She understood the logic behind his decision—no, the feeling. Maybe it was precisely that understanding that compelled her to ask.

She was used to working separately. She could make it on her own. She’d been promoted exactly because she’d demonstrated as much. But being used to it, being capable of it, didn’t mean it wasn’t nerve-racking.

She’s lucky, Guild Girl thought, noticing a prickle in her heart. She was envious of how this girl could ask that so directly. It wasn’t something she herself could do.

“I once...,” he started, but then he shook his head and said, “No... Never mind. I never told you, did I?”

“——?” Priestess was perplexed.

He offered a brief word of thanks to Guild Girl, refastening the belt around his shoulder. Then he made sure the sword of a strange length was ready at his hip and his little round shield cinched on his arm. Once he was satisfied with the state of his equipment, he nodded, then plunged a hand into the innards of the torn-up goblin. Without a moment’s hesitation, he smeared the dark gore all over his cheap-looking helmet and leather armor.

“Doesn’t matter if there are a hundred of them. In a cave, I will be victorious.” The slayer of goblins sounded downright nonchalant, his voice rasping like a rusty door from deep in his throat. “I will kill all the goblins.”



After the roar and the rush of hot air had passed, only the blackened, smoking floor was left behind. This new stain on old stone—well now, was it a five or six?

An elegant foot stepped onto that spot, and Witch's face relaxed into a lovely smile. She held a short staff of wood, the metalwork on it glowing with magic power.

"I knew this...would come in handy..."

"Yeah, but ain't this a little boring?"

Witch put the Fireball Wand away while Spearman grumbled. When you walked into a room full of squirming, amorphous monsters, but you had the initiative, there was only one thing to do. A good old-fashioned Fireball spell. Any adventurer worth their salt knew that.

Adventurers didn't have unlimited strength and endurance, after all. Even on a basic hack and slash, you had to conserve your resources. Open with a big ball of flame, then pile into the room and stomp whatever was left. Spells were likewise a limited resource, though—and that was why magical items like this were so useful.

That first spell I learned was for attack, Spearman thought as he entered the room, scanning the area and keeping Witch behind him for safety.

There was Thunderwave, which sent electricity rippling in every direction, and Shatter, which unleashed a shock wave. Lots of perfectly good spells for magic users: stuff those Rainmakers and wind herders never even dreamed of. He knew from experience that magic was a lot more than just lobbing fireballs and slinging lightning bolts, but still...

Wouldn't blame anyone who thought that stuff was awfully cool.

He gave Witch the all-clear signal, motioning her inside. She immediately

walked in without the slightest hesitation, as she placed her complete trust in him. Her voluptuous body's movements when she walked were reminiscent of a lady in the ballroom. How appropriate: It made Spearman's heart dance, the way she appeared totally aware of her own power.

"So what is it we're after again?" He certainly wasn't asking because he'd forgotten the objective of their adventure or hadn't been paying attention to the quest.

"Good, question... I believe it, was...a medicine that bestows, immortality."

She was perfectly eager to talk about this subject—he'd heard that most mages were. Anyway, there would have to be something wrong with him for him not to listen to a beautiful woman who was speaking to him personally.

"Immortality, huh? Sure that's not bullshit?" Spearman hardly believed it. As if the gods would allow such a thing to exist. They would never permit something that would so completely upset the balance of the scales. How could they? True, some extremely advanced necromancers and the like quit their personhood and became undead. But even liches could be destroyed. If you wanted to kill them badly enough, you could do it.

"If it were, true...it would be, trouble...I guess."

"So we're here to find out. Makes sense to me." He headed toward the hallway to the next room, stepping on the scorched tile as he did so. However much the story might strain credulity, the quest giver wanted them to see what was in here, so that's what they would do. It wouldn't be very adventurer-y to quibble about the logic of the tale. As long as money equal to the task was on offer, a real adventurer had just one response to any request: "You've got it!"

That was how Spearman always aspired to act, but now he asked Witch, "What do you make of it?"

"Another...good, question," she said, her heels clicking on the stone. "I think it should be...fine."

The hallway was dark, too dark for human eyes to see easily. Spearman reached into his bag and came up with a palm-sized sphere that he tossed into the gloom. It began to glow faintly—it was something he'd acquired on an

earlier adventure, a glass orb filled with lightmoss. It wasn't some important magic item, but it was helpful often enough that he considered it a treasure. Not every magic item had to be an enchanted spear, after all. More than one adventurer had blown themselves to pieces when they accidentally wandered into a gas-filled area with their torch lit.

Just suppose..., Spearman thought as he drifted through the dark corridor, grabbing up the ball of light as he went. Suppose he were to die at this very moment. Would "the Frontier's Strongest" go down as another adventurer who was killed by a stupid mistake? Or would they remember him as someone who had carefully considered the situation, then acted knowing he was going to die?

Or perhaps—perhaps nobody would know where he was or what had happened to him, and he would go entirely forgotten.

All real possibilities.

There was no way for anyone to know what a dead person had been thinking or feeling in their last moments. Necromancers were sometimes said to hear the whisperings of departed spirits, but even that, one had to be skeptical of. After all, no one could prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that those were the souls of actual dead people. For one thing, you often heard that the shock of death caused memories and sense of self to become fuzzy...

"Don't see any problems," he said.

"Ah..."

Without a scout's abilities, Spearman had to rely on his exceptional physical talents. It wasn't exactly fun, but it made things go a lot quicker than just complaining.

First and foremost, it was impossible to do everything alone. Nor was it necessary. Still... Here, pushing deeper and deeper into the ruins with Witch, he couldn't help mumbling, "Having Other Self would sure be nice when you're exploring."

"Nice, yes. Yes, but..." Witch sounded unusually hesitant. She loved the ambiguous, roundabout pronouncements so characteristic of spell casters, but she was rarely at a loss for words.

Spearman cast a glance over his shoulder at his partner. “Don’t think you ever learned it, right?”

The wide-brimmed hat shook briefly from side to side. She knew it. But he didn’t remember ever having seen her use it.

“I don’t...like it...very much.” It was, she said, a most terrible spell. People thought it was a great thing to know. That it was “nice.” Everyone wanted to use it—but that wasn’t the kind of spell it was. She sounded like a woman talking about monsters under the bed or hiding in the closet, but Spearman only replied, “That right?” If Witch said so, then he had no doubt it was true.

“Besides...” Witch’s eyes flitted back and forth as if looking for the words in thin air, then she murmured, “Balls of fire...I *do*, like.” She pushed down the brim of her hat to hide her face.

If a smile happened to pass over Spearman’s lips, it wasn’t because of the childishness of her words. It was because the beautiful woman beside him had been so generous as to show him this innocent, girlish side of herself.

There was the famous story of that great, brave fae-magicker, who had cleared all the evil souls in hell with a single Fireball spell.

Or was that a thunderbolt?

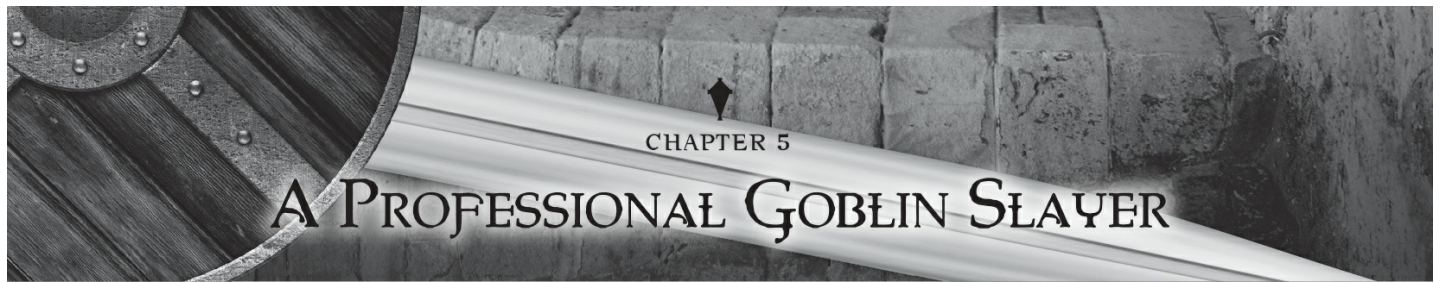
Whichever, it wasn’t for a young boy to judge who had nothing but a spear on his shoulder and a fascination with heroes. He could understand: If you were powerful enough to cast Other Self, you would just want to use Fireball instead. Even if it did come from a magic wand...

“Something...the matter?”

“Nah, it’s all good,” Spearman replied the next moment. He’d learned a little magic (emphasis on *a little*), so he understood. Magic users—spell slingers—got that name because, well, they slung spells. But if you thought it was enough just to stand there and chant some magical incantations, then you weren’t controlling the spell; it was controlling you. Be it a fireball, be it a thunderbolt, or be it the smallest of magics as you lit your pipe...

None was better or worse than another. There was only learning the spell and using it; better or worse was determined by the caster.

“So what’ve we got next?” Spearman grinned as he kicked down the door to the next room. He hoped it wouldn’t be all fireballs. He wanted a chance to use his spear.



The air was damp and heavy, the hallways confusing, the stones slick with moss and moisture, and the smell fetid.

Terrible though it was to say, he was more accustomed to this than to any other situation; in this environment, he knew what to do, and he did it. At this moment, he crouched low and moved through the ruins without a sound, without hesitation, and without stopping even when he sensed a presence ahead.

Instead of taking his sword into his hand, he produced a single length of string from a chink in his armor.

“GOOROGGBB...B, B?!”

He came up from behind the goblin—who never noticed him, though no one would pity the creature for it—and strangled him in one swift move. He pulled the string tight, twisting it, pulling the goblin’s body upward as if heaving it onto his shoulder. With a human target, such a move was just for show, but with a goblin, the target’s own body weight made strangulation more efficient. Moreover, his goal wasn’t suffocation, but to crush the creature’s windpipe, robbing it of consciousness. That was even quicker.

When it came to physical size and strength, the average human was as far from the average goblin as the sky was from the earth. Resistance would be futile.

After a moment, he felt the goblin go limp; he continued to hold it for several more seconds, making sure it was no longer breathing.

Goblin Slayer knew many ways to kill goblins without making a sound.

“...Hrmph.”

Thus, the real problem for him was information. Goblin heads tended to contain very little of it. Goblin stomachs, on the other hand...

He laid the goblin down in the dim maze and began to dissect the corpse. This was why he'd crushed the creature's windpipe: It would be easier to examine what came out when the corpse voided itself. He grabbed the dagger from the goblin's loincloth and used it to stir through the stuff.

There was plenty of it. This creature had been well fed. But he didn't see any hair or teeth.

A goblin getting proper nutrition? He thought back, briefly, to the mage who had taught him about these things. About how the size of the horde related to the size of the goblin. This goblin, however, didn't look so unusual. There was need for caution but not for worry.

"All right." Goblin Slayer propped the creature's corpse up against the wall as if it were merely sitting there. He would look like he'd fallen asleep on the job. It was an idea his elf companion had come up with at some point, and it was certainly an excellent ploy when one didn't want to be noticed.

That's right: Don't be noticed and avoid wasteful spending of equipment.

Then, with one goblin disposed of, Goblin Slayer let out a breath. He didn't know how many goblins there were and couldn't guess the size of the nest, and he was alone. Just like always.

It was only after the thought crossed his mind that he realized it had been quite some time since that *always* had applied. As for whether that was a good thing or a bad thing, he couldn't begin to guess.

It was only when he told himself *I have to remain calm* that he realized he was agitated, and that was why he murmured it aloud: "I have to remain calm." There was no one to hear him at the moment. Of course there wasn't: He had decided to act alone.

Goblin Slayer blinked several times. No human could see in the dark without a torch—normally. But right now was different.

He dug through the bag over his shoulder, the one he was borrowing from Guild Girl. It wasn't his bag, and he wasn't exactly sure what was in it, but...

"Belladonna eye drops."

He recognized the small bottle and what it was for.

He opened the visor of his helmet and, without removing the padded balaclava that left only his eyes exposed, put several droplets into each eye. After a moment, his vision began to get fuzzy, but the outlines of objects in the dark became more prominent. He suspected that if he were exposed to light in this state, it would be as crippling as being shut in the dark normally was.

The same mage had told him that goblin vision was different from that of humans. The way he was seeing now might not be exactly what the world looked like to a goblin, but it was a good thing to experience it.

“Now, then...” He replaced the eye drops in the bag (carefully, for he was only borrowing it) and set off once more down the hall. He saw what he thought were fresh footprints, but it was difficult to be sure with the stones soaked as they were.

Time was ever his enemy. So it was on every goblin hunt.

“GOORGB!”

“GGBG...! GOROGB!”

“GROGBBGB!!”

He stood still once more when he heard goblins jabbering faintly ahead of him. With his fuzzy vision, he could just make out a chamber in the dark beyond. And within, goblins. Yammering about some pointless thing or other, no doubt.

That's fine.

It didn't matter to him what exactly they were saying. Goblins had a language; they even had a culture of humor. But that didn't help him. What mattered was that he didn't hear any excitement among their yammering. He didn't hear any people's voices, any women.

He stilled his breathing. Hold your breath, and you gained a measure of control over your body's most minuscule movements. He worked hard to be as silent as possible. Then he listened—and began breathing again once he had acquired enough information. The situation was simple.

Goblin Slayer promptly picked up a pebble at his feet and flung it straight ahead.

“GROGB...?”

“GOROOOBBG!”

The pebble went sailing over the group’s heads, attracting their attention when it landed.

Goblins were stupid. They could be dangerous in a group. If you could distract the group, though, you could control them.

In any event, they were interested in nothing except personal gain, making their own lives easier, and being more important than anybody else.

“.....!”

Not waiting another instant, Goblin Slayer charged in. His dagger was already in his hand, making him faster than the goblins who scrambled to ready their weapons.

Two with swords, one archer!

“First...one!”

“GOROGB?! ”

The goblin unfortunate enough to be closest to the entrance found himself torn open from shoulder to throat—and promptly expired. There was a whistling sound and a spray of blood as the creature collapsed. Goblin Slayer put a hand to the stone floor as he went past. Before a pool of blood could even form, he was making his next move.

“GORGB!!”

“GOG! GORGBB?! ”

He rolled forward, passing under an arrow that hummed listlessly overhead. Goblins considered all enemies, except maybe rheas and dwarves, to be giants. They would naturally aim high.

The goblin in front berated the one behind for having missed his shot. How foolish of him.

“That’s—two!!”

“GOOROGGBB?!”

In a single fluid motion, Goblin Slayer came out of his roll and thrust his leg forward, kicking the goblin’s small body. As he stood up, he crushed its cervical vertebrae, at which point his dagger was already coming down.

“Three...!”

“GBBGRG?!”

The other goblin, fumbling for a second arrow, stumbled back with a sword in his forehead. Then he pitched backward, the bow and arrow tumbling out of his hands.

“——.....” Goblin Slayer let out a long breath and quickly looked around. He had only one pair of eyes to see here now, only one pair of ears to hear. What he could take in, the precision he could have, was limited.

There were so many things to take care of, so many things to do, and he had few cards to play. Normally, he wouldn’t even have had to rely on Priestess’s Holy Light at a moment like this; he could have simply counted on High Elf Archer for backup as he forged ahead. Lizard Priest and himself together would have been unstoppable here. Dwarf Shaman and Priestess would have kept watch.

The battle was over, yes, but he was letting himself relax too much. No need to worry unduly about equipment. If push came to shove... No, no.

“My problem is thinking in terms of what’s normal,” Goblin Slayer muttered, reproaching himself, and then he searched the corpses at his feet for any useful possessions. All he found, though, was a sorry-looking dagger in one of their belts. He was used to using such things; it might not be much for a warrior, but he had no objections to it. And yet...

“.....Hrm.”

It felt...off, somehow. He seemed to recall seeing an identical item not long before.

He stretched his fingers inside his leather gloves, then carefully inspected the

dagger's blade.

It's the same?

It looked awfully like the weapon the first goblin he'd killed here had been using. The decorations and the condition of the blade didn't matter that much. It was only natural with a mass-produced item—or was it? Could several items so completely identical really be produced? Items that matched each other down to the chips on the blade and the wearing on the leather-wrapped hilt?

".....I simply don't know," Goblin Slayer said softly, then put the dagger in the sheath at his own hip. It was strange, but he spent no more time worrying about it. Time was something he had too little of, like physical strength, like even the capacity to think. And unquestionably, there were many things to do, and the dungeon felt so large as to beggar the imagination.

"...Let's go," he said to no one in particular, and then Goblin Slayer, alone, set off into the dark.

§

"What? Goblin Slayer went solo?" Heavy Warrior asked, his voice concerned amid the chattering of the festive crowd.

People were swapping stories—those who had come crawling back from the dungeon, those who had somehow made it through. This was an auspicious day. A day of joy before the start of winter. Anyone would jump at a pleasant topic of conversation.

Among the bustling street stalls, though, Heavy Warrior, wearing civilian clothes with his sword at his side, was frowning.

"Yeah, that's right," said Inspector, the symbol of the Supreme God hanging around her neck.

"That's what I was told anyway." Standing beside her and nodding was Half-Elf Light Warrior, who'd been helping out inside the dungeon until a few minutes before. He'd agreed to come bring the message because Heavy Warrior was his party leader. He was wearing leather armor and carrying a rapier.

Adventurers might keep something on them in case of an emergency, but

that weirdo was the only one who constantly walked around town in full armor.

Think I remember something about a “weird” nodding elf, though... Heavy Warrior recalled an old adventuring tale he’d heard and fell silent.

“Anyway, we’ve got things covered inside. Maybe we could ask you to handle stuff out here?” Inspector said.

“Knowing *him*, I doubt things will get out of control too quickly,” the half-elf added.

“True enough.” Heavy Warrior nodded but continued frowning. He had no idea how far ahead that eccentric adventurer was actually thinking, but it wasn’t a bad choice that he’d made. If they got the helpers all excited, it would torpedo one of the most important objectives of this dungeon exploration contest. And all for goblins—nothing more than goblins.

An adventurer who couldn’t beat some goblins was no adventurer; and if some goblins sent them into a total panic, they were helpless anyway. The chattering masses, though, weren’t likely to be so understanding. The molehill would become a mountain; there would be criticisms, recriminations, arrogance.

And it’d all be a huge headache.

Back when he’d had his heart set on becoming king, he’d never even imagined such things.

“Ten or twenty goblins?” asked the woman beside him. “Not even a sideshow.” It was Female Knight, wearing a skirt (very unusual for her, given how uncomfortable she looked) and a smirk (less unusual).

Heavy Warrior glanced at his party member in her unfamiliar outfit and said only, “There might be a hundred.”

“Hr... Hrmm...” Female Knight’s fists clenched and unclenched rhythmically, as if she was eager at this moment to charge into the ruins and produce the proverbial mountain of corpses and rivers of blood. As if at any moment she might draw the sword that hung at her waist (and that looked deeply at odds with her dress).

With Heavy Warrior and Female Knight were a couple of young kids, a boy and a girl, clutching lunches procured from one of the stalls. They were evidently enjoying the festival and hadn't yet entirely comprehended the changed situation.

Can't blame 'em—I get that I'm overprotective.

Female Knight advocated being substantially harsher with the kids on the grounds that they never took responsibility for anything, but Heavy Warrior disagreed. When he thought back to his own younger days—well, what did he remember? His parents had never praised him, had hardly ever made him feel safe. So fine, he thought. Give the kids compliments, let their imaginations roam, let them move at their own pace. It was impossible to call childhood an overindulgence, no matter how long it lasted.

"I'll take one of those," Heavy Warrior said, plucking a skewer of cat meat from Druid Girl's hand, provoking an "Oh!" of protest. He took a bite, then flipped a coin to an alcohol vendor walking by, grabbed a beer, and downed it in one gulp.

"I'll make it up to you later. What I need now is some food in my belly and my gear. Keep your eyes open, kids."

"Aw, don't worry about it. This glutton bought plenty," Scout Boy teased.

"I'm *not* a glutton!" Druid Girl exclaimed, her face going red. For a rhea, all the skewers she was holding amounted to little more than a snack. Looking at them from a purely human perspective was probably not quite fair.

Heavy Warrior spotted an opportunity in the kids' bickering to snatch another skewer. He handed it to Female Knight, who complained, "The grease will get all over my dress," but took it regardless, holding it in both hands and munching away. Next, he looked at Half-Elf Light Warrior, who shook his head and said, "I'm all right."

"This isn't the time to economize."

"I tend not to eat much."

"Explains why you're such a beanpole," Female Knight remarked. She licked the fat off her fingers, finished with the skewer almost as soon as she had

begun. It was tough, laboring under a voracious appetite. But being able to take in nutrition quickly yet efficiently could be considered a skill for a warrior.

That's what Heavy Warrior was thinking as he took a couple more bites of cat meat, but then he looked up. In the distance, on the far side of the crowd, he saw a flash of golden hair that he recognized.

"Huh? Hey!"

It was weird that she wasn't in the dungeon—didn't she usually follow that other guy around all the time? But the young woman wearing the vestments of a priestess of the Earth Mother didn't so much as glance in his direction. She was chatting and laughing with some other adventurers, and in the blink of an eye, she had vanished once more into the crowd.

Did I get the wrong person? She was normally more alert to her surroundings than that and certainly wouldn't have completely ignored him. Besides, the woman's body, her facial expressions—they were very similar to Priestess's but not quite the same. Just simple mistaken identity. Probably.

"So what are we going to do?" the party's accountant asked.

Heavy Warrior stroked his chin and continued to chew thoughtfully on the meat. "Mm, good question." There were many things to weigh in the scales: duty, compassion, trust, the reward, and their lives. One had to look at the entire situation and think it through.

Well, if he of all people is going charging in after a bunch of goblins...

"Our place is here," Heavy Warrior announced. "Our job is to protect the people out here."

"You're sure about that?"

"What, you think we should all go piling in there shouting and fighting in the same place?"

Admittedly, there was a certain logic to it. After all, the main battlefield got all the attention. And if you didn't get the attention, then, well, no one would pay attention to you, and you would never earn a reputation. Standing out was how adventurers sold themselves. And yet...

“We’re not kids playing war, here.”

“Fair enough,” Half-Elf Light Warrior said with a shrug and a half smile. He seemed to have expected this answer.

You couldn’t have everyone in your party simply nodding and agreeing with everything you said. Even when making the simplest decisions, objections were crucial. Heavy Warrior had a high opinion not only of the Adventurers Guild in this town but of the nation that stood above it. He understood that here in the Four-Cornered World, the places you couldn’t see always seemed vaster than the ones you could. There were surprisingly few problems that could be solved simply by swinging a sword around.

On this occasion, no one had yet asked them to spring into action or even to come in as reinforcements, so their job was to hold the rear. He glanced at Inspector to see her nodding and looking somehow relieved.

This was the work the Adventurers Guild had given him. If he didn’t do it and do it well, it would reflect poorly on him as a Silver.

“The issue is the number of participants who may or may not have gone missing,” Female Knight said curtly. Even as she pulled the quarreling children apart with one hand, she was scanning the crowd. “If there’s very many of them, searching for them could be a chore—but if word gets out, there could be panic, and that would only make things harder.”

“...Agreed. How many is it?” Heavy Warrior asked, finishing off the last mouthful of meat and tossing the bones into a nearby bush. The dogs who had been brought along to clean up any leftovers would show up soon enough to get rid of them.

“What *is* the current count?” Half-Elf Light Warrior asked.

“Right now, it’s... Well, anyway, the number we’ve confirmed is...” Inspector leafed through a notebook. “One person. A girl with black hair.”

§

Of course, needless to say, for all that, not much had changed inside the dungeon.

“Eeeek! What’s going on here?!”

“Arrrgh! St-stop! Stop...please?!”

A beautiful elvish youngster—a lordling or a ladylet? (it was hard to say)—was being squeezed by some supple thing, a snake or a tongue or who knew what. Meanwhile, a young man had grabbed hold of a flying ax that, moving on its own, was now spinning him around by the handle. He felt like he might get his arms cut off, but, well, this was the dungeon exploration contest. Even if it struck his arms, he was unlikely to lose them—unlike that hero who had gone, enchanted sword in hand, to hunt the dead spirits. And the elf would be released before all their bones were broken, so there wouldn’t be any great tragedy.

In other words, the only ones who thought this situation was really and truly desperate were the victims themselves.

And so it went, the participants in the contest running around shouting and shrieking.

The facilitator watching over all of this, though, seemed less than pleased. “You there, you’re doing it wrong!”

“Heek!” The cry escaped a black-clothed adventurer who was suddenly collared by a slim arm that emerged from the darkness. They must have been a scout or the like. They were dressed all in black as if they thought they were a ninja or something—a ridiculous display. They had been creeping through the dungeon, sneaking up on a shadowed figure, and were just about to fling a bladed weapon concealed on the back of their hand.

She (judging by the pitch of the shout) was dragged bodily off the wrong path like a squalling cat.

“Listen, you, that’s another participant, isn’t it? Take a good look.”

“Oh...”

“And another thing—I know you were too busy aiming to think about anything else, but that’s no excuse for being off the marked path.”

“Er, uh, oh... I-it’s hard to make out what something is when it’s standing

still..." The eyes that peered out from under the black cloth indeed glinted gold like a cat's.

High Elf Archer looked at the girl, whose shoulders slumped dejectedly, and said, "Ah, fine," with a laugh. "Here. Try not to lose it again, eh?" Then *shoop*, she tossed the girl a sliver of diamond, proof of advancement in the competition. The young woman must have dropped it in her excitement.

The ninja girl scrambled to catch it; High Elf Archer said, "Good," and nodded. "You've got a long road ahead still. Try not to mistake any people for monsters and attack them, all right?"

"Yes, ma'am..." The girl looked even more despondent than before, but the high elf slapped her smartly on the back. The girl in black stiffened, and she took a few unsteady steps forward but then stopped and checked her items. A wooden tube that served as a canteen. Provisions wrapped in dried leaves. A bottle filled with ointment. The sliver of diamond.

She slumped, holding her belly pathetically—maybe she was hungry—but it lasted for only a second. Then the girl took a decisive step forward.

This was no more than a minor issue; they had run into quite a few others like it.

Shows they were right not to send a bunch of people to help with the search. It was the only possible conclusion Priestess could draw based on the dribble of reports she heard as she scuttled about the aid station. They were having enough trouble just running the competition as it had been planned. If people knew there were goblins around, she could only imagine what would happen. It would be a tremendous job to get everyone out safely and calm them all down...

Even if they did, no doubt somebody would have the bright idea to go try to kill the goblins to make a name for themselves. Or someone would have some twisted impulse to spread some weird rumor to scare everyone else. The resulting commotion might even draw the goblins right to them.

Solo, though...

She wasn't sure about that. Had he thought this through? Priestess just didn't

know. It was harder than one might think to separate logic and emotion. And while this was hardly her first time being in such a situation, she still wasn't entirely used to it.

How many times was this since she'd met him? Maybe ten, at the very most—that was what she thought anyway. It was only a guess. Maybe it was more than that; she couldn't be sure. The number of times that he, Goblin Slayer, had left her behind to hunt goblins alone was few indeed.

No, Priestess thought, shaking her head; she was being impossibly childish. It was she who had entered *his* life late. He had earned the nickname Goblin Slayer by confronting goblins on his own.

So—yes. What she found uncomfortable wasn't that he was out there by himself.

It was being left alone. Waiting.

"...Mn." When she thought about it that way, it certainly seemed like her own problem. Having reached this conclusion, Priestess stopped administering first aid for a moment to wipe the sweat off her brow. It would have been easier if she'd used miracles, but there was no reason to do so. Miracles were the work of the gods; you could beg for one, but it was no guarantee you would receive it.

Miracles were not granted as recompense for faith. They weren't to be used simply to make your life easier. There would be no point to them that way.

Thus, Priestess wrapped bandages around bruises and considered that enough.

"Try not to move it too much. This is just first aid, after all."

The whispered "Okay" she got in return came from a young man—maybe he'd left his hometown hoping to become an adventurer. He hadn't fallen prey to the goblins or been caught in one of the traps. No, he'd simply slipped on a patch of damp moss.

Priestess, though, felt no impulse to laugh at him or consider him foolish or stupid. She'd fallen before, herself. If he'd been a little luckier with the dice, he might not have slipped.

She made sure the young man was lying quietly, then stood up. Who was next?

“I see you’re working hard,” a voice said, surprising her.

“Oh, I—” Priestess looked over quickly, but her mild alarm turned to a smile when she saw that it was Guild Girl. “I’m all right, thank you. I used to give help like this at the temple, ever since I was small.”

“Then you know exactly when it’s time to take a break.” Guild Girl had been rushing this way and that, but you wouldn’t have known it to look at her. Though her outfit was for fieldwork and not for the office, she looked impeccable: She stood up straight; her hair was lovely; and she was even wearing perfume. Priestess saw Guild Girl as clearly different from herself: sweating, huffing and puffing, and running from one thing to the next like a chicken with its head cut off.

Somewhat reluctantly, Priestess nodded. It was a small, quiet answer, the same way the boy had answered her a moment before.

What does she do with herself? Priestess wondered. She normally only saw Guild Girl at the reception desk at the Guild. Saw her when they left on an adventure. Saw her when they came back. Priestess knew next to nothing about what Guild Girl was like between those times. She couldn’t restrain a desire to ask about it.

“When all you can do is wait...it’s hard, isn’t it?” Priestess said.

The response she received was nothing she had imagined: “What are you talking about? I can’t believe you!”

Priestess looked at Guild Girl wide-eyed, but Guild Girl simply smiled and motioned her toward a corner of the room where they’d be out of the way. She sat down with her back against the wall and offered Priestess a waterskin that smelled faintly sweet. Priestess took it and eventually brought herself to drink some—she was pleased to discover it was water flavored with lemon and honey.

“Okay,” Guild Girl said, sensing that Priestess had relaxed a little and seizing upon the moment. “What *is* it that you think we’re doing right now?”

“Um...” Priestess let her gaze wander. It wasn’t that she didn’t know. It was obvious. But sometimes being asked the obvious can throw you. You start to wonder if it’s a trick question.

If it was a trick question, though, Priestess wasn’t coming up with the answer. She looked around as if she might find it in the thin air in front of her.

The first-aid station was full of participants and adventurers (serving as facilitators) rushing this way that. Priestess watched a warlock follow an elf woman by, then nodded. “We’re...running a dungeon exploration contest... right?”

“That’s right.” Guild Girl giggled, holding up a finger like a teacher making a point and adopting her most didactic tone. “We have to keep an eye on the participants while also knowing how much progress they’ve made. We have to be prepared for any unexpected situations and communicate clearly about them...”

Even at the stalls outside, there must have been some arguments with customers. For that matter, there must have been arguments between spectators. Even that group of rogues whom they’d learned about through those unusual circumstances might be on the move. Theft, pickpocketing—Priestess couldn’t ignore such things, but they were simply part of being a person in this world as well.

“It’s tough, huh?” she said.

“Yes, tough indeed,” Guild Girl responded with a smile. In a single striking motion, she got to her feet and brushed the dirt off her outfit. There were still many things they had to do—needed to do. No matter how worried you were or what you were worried about, the things you had to do didn’t disappear.

“Even simply waiting is a major job in its own right. Never call it *all you can do*.”

Priestess looked up at Guild Girl, backlit by the torches that illuminated the dungeon gloom. Then she took a swig of the contents of the waterskin—much the way Dwarf Shaman might have—and jumped to her feet. “I’ll...I’ll make sure I work even harder!” She handed the waterskin back to Guild Girl with her profound thanks. Guild Girl took it from her.

Priestess bowed her head again, then hurried back to the first-aid station. Protect, heal, save. Those were the very bones of her faith.

§

The goblin found all things, everything, unpleasant. Day after day living in a dank hole; day after day eating the same meat. Seeing the same faces. Couldn't remember when it started to be like this, couldn't imagine how long it might go on for. That was his everything, his world, and he was wild with rage at all of it.

None of them understood anything.

That thing earlier (for goblins, every nasty or envy-inducing thing was "earlier") had been just the same. They'd finally found a nice little spawn-bearer, wandering around lost where she shouldn't have been—but they had spent her right then and there.

Apparently, *they* were dead now, but then, what else would they be? Foolish idiots like them were always going to die, and anyway, it served them right for trying to keep her all to themselves.

This goblin was firmly convinced he was not like the others. Take a simple example: the people scurrying around over his head at that moment. They were eating delicious foods, enjoying themselves, and had all sorts of wonderful, pretty possessions. All while he was languishing in this filthy hole!

It was unforgivable. It was all their fault. Those people were terrible!

It rankled this goblin to continually have to follow the orders of that jackass who was forever waving his stick around like he owned the world, but he did agree with what the guy said. They should drag those surface dwellers down into this pit, steal everything they had, trample them underfoot, and make playthings of them.

It was only natural—it was their *right*—given how it was the goblins who had suffered everything to this point. *Rights*, of course, were a difficult concept for goblins, but it seemed like something that applied here.

This goblin, though, was not like his friends (a word he himself would never have used). While the others were chasing those intruders all over, he would bide his time and wait. Not because he was so serious-minded. A serious goblin

is not something that exists in the Four-Cornered World.

He believed he wasn't stupid. Not like those others. He wouldn't do anything so foolish as chase around a bunch of crying, screaming idiots. He simply had to let the others chase them, let them tire out the prey. Then he would sneak up and finish the victim off. The other goblins would gibber and jabber about it, no doubt, but so what? He was the one with the brains and strength.

As for the self-important idiot with the stick, he'd drag him down when the time was right. First, though, he would enjoy himself to his heart's content with the prey he captured. If it was a man, well, he would eat him. If a woman—well, he would eat her, too, in the long run, but there were other ways to enjoy a woman before that.

How many would his companions be able to corner? They were incompetent, so the answer was probably not many. If the prey was especially spunky, it could be fun to break her spirit, but if she was *too* lively, it defeated the point.

The goblin sat down on a nearby rock, holding his crude spear and muttering to himself. In his mind, he kept seeing his comrades' failures and him having to clean up after them. That made him annoyed and then angry. An illogical, incoherent, self-serving rage.

The goblin, convinced that this was righteous and justified anger, concluded that it was reason enough that he should have the prey. He let his imagination run even wilder, his appetites expanding as he salivated at the prospect of success and glory on that day to come.

He never noticed the knife that slipped in among his fantasies; the next thing he knew, his consciousness sank into darkness, never to return.

§

"These aren't ruins anymore. This is a cave." Goblin Slayer didn't even spare a glance in the direction of the goblin whose skull had been split by his knife, the body tumbling into a pit. The space around him no longer looked like a dungeon proper but was studded with rocky outcroppings. They were too large and complex to be anthills but covered too much space to look like they had formed naturally.

Goblin Slayer was suddenly reminded of an old story about some giant monster that lived underground. It had been years before when there had been a great commotion about the thing, which had been inadvertently and most unpleasantly discovered by some miners.

Or had that been some kind of slime or something? At the time, he hadn't been very interested in the stories of others.

Regardless, what I'm dealing with now is goblins, he thought, casting aside the hazy old memory. He seriously doubted goblins could coexist with a monster that bored through rock. Nor did the goblins show enough coordination to suggest they were working with some other agent of Chaos. No, this cave belonged to the goblins, which meant it belonged to Goblin Slayer.

"—..." How long had it been since he'd begun working his way down the hidden tunnel? He figured out a rough estimate based on the numbers he'd been counting in his mind and decided it hadn't been that long. It wasn't clear how many participants were lost down here, but he suspected they were still safe for the time being. In any event, man or woman, the wait had been brief enough that they would still be alive, assuming they hadn't been killed in battle.

He had to hurry, but he mustn't panic. So he worked his way along carefully, hiding among the stalagmites, studying what was ahead of him. The ability to see in the dark granted by the eye drops wasn't dramatic, but it unquestionably helped. It wasn't quite like the night vision possessed by elves or dwarves—or as helpful as using light to overpower his foes...

No, he thought, *not as helpful as having her use it*.

That's right, it wasn't he himself, but Priestess—so long as he had her help, he wouldn't be able to use the drops regularly.

In any case, it was enough to see a pair of bluffs where the ground fell away, a narrow path stretching between them. The "path" was nothing so convenient as a bridge. It was simply a large stalagmite that had somehow been knocked over and set across the rift. It looked sturdy enough to support a lizardman, let alone a human—or, of course, a goblin.

Goblins, he thought. Not only the one he had just dealt with. It was more than one. That one had simply imagined he could set an ambush on his own.

Ten, twenty, maybe more. Not likely to be a hundred, but Goblin Slayer was undoubtedly outnumbered. The question was whether they had noticed their companion plummeting down a moment ago. Goblins always believed, after all, that they alone would not fall.

He saw figures moving in the shadows, evidently convinced they were hiding. He wasn't able to make out exactly how many there were, but he could tell that if he was too impetuous, they would make mincemeat of him.

He understood that perfectly well. The question was what he should do. Goblin Slayer didn't agonize over it.

It simply means I need to make my move decisively.

“GOROGGBB?!?!”

The invader moved like the wind, although High Elf Archer would have laughed to hear him described as *like an arrow from a bow*. The goblins, who found themselves ambushed just as they had been intending to spring their own trap, stupidly threw away their advantage by setting up a cacophonous yammering.

That made things easier.

“Two!”

“GGB?!?!” The bottle, thrown like a stone, shattered both itself and the goblin's head, spilling the contents of both everywhere. Blood and brains, bones and glass scattered, along with a sweet smell that seemed out of place among the gore.

Goblin Slayer jumped into the cloud of perfume, charged straight through it, and kept running.

“GOROGB?!”

“GOROGBBGB?!?!”

Yes, he ran *straight through it*.

His prey knew only that something that smelled like a woman had leaped out in front of them. Excitement, confusion, and rage created a critical opening, for none of them moved to stop Goblin Slayer.

“GOOGB!! GOROGGBB!!!!”

“GGB!”

“GOOOOBBGGBB!!!!”

The goblins, shouting, threw aside everything else to give chase. Each wanted to reach him first and drag him down, lest the others take him from them. Each of them believed he deserved everything. So each clutched his weapon, swung, and chased. The little bit of rational thought, if it could be called that, they’d possessed until a moment before had abandoned them completely. The goblins were now like wild beasts, focused on one thought and one thought alone: take for themselves the quarry before them.

I’ll have to reimburse her.

The thought came to Goblin Slayer as he studied the terrain with his fuzzy vision—but it did not have to do with goblins, and in an instant, he had chased it from his helmeted head. He ran.

Human bodies are different from those of goblins. They’re faster and have greater stamina. That’s not accounting for equipment, of course. Thus, the goblin didn’t particularly question it when he suddenly found himself gaining on his prey. He thought he was simply that fast, faster than his foolish companions. And the idiot in front of him was about to collapse from fatigue.

“GOROGGB!!”

“Three...!!”

The fantasy persisted in the goblin’s mind even as his head was separated from his body. The goblin pitched forward, choking on a spray of blood, trampled by his companions behind him. Even if the throat hadn’t happened to be a vital point, the stomping would have broken his bones and burst his organs, more than enough to finish him off.

“Four, five...!”

“GROOG!!”

“Six!”

“GGBGROOGB?!”

Goblin Slayer never slowed down as he dealt one blow after another to the enemies who had followed him. Blood flew, screams echoed, bodies tumbled, and that slowed down the pursuing goblins.

Meanwhile, Goblin Slayer dove in among the disorderly rocks, steadying his breath. The goblins' advantage lay in the element of surprise, combined with their numbers. Those were the two things one must keep in mind when hunting them.

Surprise them instead. Undermine the difference in strength. That was all.

Cover was always his ally. And grenades were a human's friend.

Goblin Slayer pulled a tear gas grenade out of his item bag and flung it out from behind the stones without much caring exactly where it went.

"GOROGB?!"

"GRGB?! GGOBOOBBERU?!"

I ought to teach her about those eventually, he thought, an image of Priestess flashing through his mind even as he savored the screams of the writhing goblins. Then he filled his lungs with oxygen, and as the air reached his brain, his thoughts sped up, the image vanishing.

"GBBG!!"

"Seven!"

"GOROGB?!"

When one of the monsters poked his head around the stalagmite, his eyes full of tears and his nose running with snot, he found himself grabbed and his chin slammed into a rock shelf. His jaw was driven, tongue and all, up into his brain; he wouldn't be opening his mouth again. This was a glory kill, Goblin Slayer-style.

He didn't give another glance to the head where it sat, as if on display, but picked up the club that had fallen at his feet. The enemy would always bring weapons to him. He didn't have to worry.

"Eight...!"

“GOOROGB?!”

His sword had already dealt with several of the enemy and was slick with blood and fat; now he calmly threw it at the back of another foe and then set off running.

As for what happened after that—well, we probably don’t need to spell out every detail. Goblin Slayer ran, and a trail of goblin corpses emerged in his wake. The situation was similar to the one on the snowy mountain or the remote village where he had gone with his childhood friend.

Only similar, though. In those instances, he had been the pursued. The one making a fighting withdrawal. The hunted. Now, it was he who was killing the goblins. Those who thoughtlessly got too close to him he finished off with a single stroke, while those who tried to keep their distance he murdered with projectiles.

He had an endless supply of weapons. He took them from the dead goblins, or broke off pieces of stalagmite, or slammed his enemies against the walls or the ground. This wasn’t like the battle in the little village (it seemed so long ago): This was a cave. And there were so many fewer goblins here than there had been in the dark tower.

But...

It’s getting complicated.

Specifically, he meant the way he had to fight. There was only himself alone to pay attention to what was happening in every direction. He had no arrows, spells, or slingshots to back him up. He was also the only one thinking about where he had been and where to go. Everything came down to what he could process, what he could mentally keep track of. If he missed even a single thing, it could be fatal.

Hence, the fact that he noticed it at that moment could only be considered a lucky roll of the dice. It was just as he ducked behind the cover of the rocks, hoping for a chance to catch his breath. The instant he heard the rush of air, he was already moving, twisting his body. “Hrgh...!”

There was an unpleasant *riiip* as his item bag was torn open, scattering the

contents everywhere. Goblin Slayer leaped to the nearest rocky plateau, not caring that his possessions were tumbling into the void.

The projectile that had nearly struck him was a crude arrow, and as for where it had come from...

“I see. Archers...”

On the other side of the chasm. Several goblin archers lined up at the far end of the giant, fallen rock. One of them was being beaten by another goblin with a staff—the archer must have gotten excited and fired too soon. Trying to get goblins to do what you wanted was difficult, even for another goblin.

“GOOROGBB! GOOROGGBBB!!!!”

“Hrk...!” The moment Goblin Slayer tried to peek out from behind the rocks, the darkness was rent by a blinding flash of light. Thanks to the eye drops, it left him unable to see, but the sound that came next made clear what had happened. There was a roar and the noise of something cracking, then a clatter of crumbling stone.

Aha. He destroyed the bridge.

Maybe the enemy realized Goblin Slayer didn’t have any ranged weapons—it was impossible to be sure what a goblin might be thinking. Most likely, though, it was that they had bows and arrows—and he did not. Goblin Slayer enjoyed the fact that the flash of light had, paradoxically, made his vision dark; he didn’t think it would be quite the same as what the goblins were seeing, but it bought him some leeway.

The arrows came whistling in but only rarely struck the rock he was hiding behind. Though, given how many of them hit the rocks and earth around him and bounced past, it was clear he couldn’t afford to underestimate the archers, either.

Now, what to do? Goblin Slayer called to mind the terrain he’d observed while running around. He realized the cleft in the earth was quite a ways across. It would be difficult if not impossible to leap the gap or even to fling a weapon across to take them out. Destroying the bridge and using arrows was a dirty trick but the right one.

They probably haven't thought far enough ahead to know what they'll do once they've finished me off. As he waited for his vision to acclimate to the dark again, Goblin Slayer plunged his hand into the item bag at his hip. He found that, indeed, there was very little left in the torn pouch and sighed. He wasn't disappointed per se. Equipment was there to be used. Sometimes, it was there to be lost.

The next thing he reached for was the belt he'd been entrusted with by Guild Girl, the one slung across his shoulder. There were items in several pouches hanging from it.

"GOOROGB!! GOOROGGBB!!!!"

"GOBBGRGB!!"

He'd used the perfume already. There were no more eye drops—just a decorative sash, a notebook and metal stylus, candies, and a few other things.

He'd hoped there might at least be a coil of rope in there, but there wasn't. The stylus was good. He tucked it into the strap of his shield. Then he lifted the visor of his helmet and tossed in one of the candies. Wincing as the flavor of the fragrant herbs filled his mouth and nostrils, he put his visor back down.

What he had to do was clear. He would spring into action. The goblin would launch another spell at him.

Still, he thought...

I'm going to miss that throwing knife.

§

"Sniff... Sniff... Augh..."

She'd failed. The girl sniffled and frowned as she slid down the slope. She knew it was too late for regrets now, yet the path seemed to go on so far behind and above her, but as for what was below—well, she was very high up. Crawling back would be a challenge, yet she was scared to work her way down, too.

Go back to the surface? No, she couldn't. This was a competition—you had to keep moving forward.

I'll just have to...do my best...!

Supporting herself, barely, with her arms and legs, the black-haired girl worked her way ever so slowly down the slope. Her hands were scraped by sand and rocks, until they began to throb terribly. Maybe she should buy some gloves.

She'd never imagined there might be a cave like this hidden within the dungeon. It didn't seem like there was anyone else down here—maybe she'd taken a wrong turn?

No, I'm on the right path...I think...

After all, if she wasn't, then why was there stuff dropped all over as if to mark out a route? The bag on the girl's back was practically bursting with the various items she'd picked up.

But if she was right...it would have to mean she was dead last. She was certain—well, almost certain—*mostly* certain—that was what was happening. For a second, she could hear the village boy chortling. The thought hurt so bad she briefly stopped right where she was, but then she shook her head. This wasn't the time.

The girl tried desperately (what did it mean to be scared to death? This must be what it felt like) to focus. She listened hard and squinted into the darkness, but she couldn't hear or see anything. Somewhere along the line, she'd run out of oil for the lantern at her hip, and as the darkness had pressed in around her, she'd become ever more anxious.

It was cowardice that kept her from crying out as loud as she could, shouting for somebody—cowardice and anxiety and embarrassment. She didn't think people trying to become adventurers did such things...

She didn't want to be laughed at again.

"O-okay... *Hup...!*" When she finally reached the bottom, the girl gazed up at the rock face that now towered across from her. Her eyes were used to the dark by this point, but even so, she couldn't see the top.

She blinked when she realized pebbles were occasionally falling from up above. She couldn't shake the sense that the cleft was collapsing from both

sides. Tears in her eyes, she cleared away the collection of little stones that had become lodged in her palm, trying to ignore the stinging pain. Then she rubbed her eyes with her sleeve and started lurching along the path through the ravine.

She was comically fearful and pitifully serious.

Whether by skill or sheer luck, it ultimately saved her life.

Shhp, shhp. She froze when she thought she heard a noise up ahead. *What could that be?* she wondered. She peered into the darkness, not just gazing but genuinely *looking*.

Whatever it was, it was almost eight feet long, moving slowly but irregularly. It appeared to have noticed her; although, it didn't seem concerned about her. It had sharp fangs and moved by first coiling up, then springing forward.

"JJJJ..."

That must be a serpent!

The girl swallowed heavily. It was an earth-colored snake.

She quietly took a step forward. The snake slithered toward her. She took a step back. The snake slithered farther forward. She tried a hesitant step to the right. The monster curled over itself, moving with her. Then left. The snake slid in the same direction.

The girl stopped. The snake stopped, too, though it watched her with bright eyes.

What should I do? She didn't even know how to begin answering that question.

Only at this point did the young girl finally remember the weight of the sword at her hip, and she hesitantly drew it. She didn't exactly have a plan for it yet, but it was a relief to have it in her hands.

I wonder... She let her eyes drop briefly to her hands, then followed the blade before looking once more at the serpent. *I wonder if I can even beat that thing...*

She suspected she could get in at least one hit. She also suspected that wasn't going to be enough. That meant she was going to get bitten or else squeezed in the snake's coils. If its bite was poisonous, there would be physical pain

involved, agony. Then again, the same would come of being squeezed to death.

And then it'll just swallow me. She seemed to remember that snakes swallowed their prey whole, so they had to break the bones first. The girl was very sorry she'd remembered that and quaked with fear at the end it portended for her. The terror brought her to her knees, and then she sat down in the dirt, feeling a chill run through her, feeling her face crumple.

She was on the verge of tears, but she didn't cry, because she knew. She knew that even if she sat and wept, no one would come to save her. She would have to do something about this herself.

Think... I have to think. This was part of the contest; probably, it was a test, and there had to be some way to pass it... Again, probably.

Still watching the serpent warily, the girl pulled off her backpack and went through its contents. The disorganized mess of equipment made it look more like a bag of random junk than an adventurer's faithful partner. There was a club, a dagger, strange red powder that made her fingers tingle when she touched it, a bottle of some kind of medicine, and a scroll.

Maybe I should use the scroll, she ventured, but then she thought better of it. It wasn't so much that it seemed like a waste—more that it just didn't feel like quite the thing. She set the scroll to one side, nodding to herself as she went through the rest of the items. She kept stealing glances in the snake's direction, but it only watched her. She was sure one of the facilitators must be holding it back, so she quickly looked to her bag again.

She couldn't think of anything to do with any of the items she recognized. Maybe she should use one of the items she didn't recognize, then. At the same time, she was scared to drink a potion she didn't know anything about. Not the potion, then. Try something else. That left...

"This, maybe...?"

The girl picked up one of the other items—she didn't know quite what it was, but it was twisted hideously; she thought maybe it was some kind of weapon. She held her sword in her right hand—it was so heavy—and took the weapon in her left, then moved forward.

“JJJJ...!”

The snake twitched its sickle-shaped head, and its tongue slid in and out with a hiss. The girl found herself thoroughly intimidated. Her knees went weak; she could feel them shaking. She was seriously questioning whether this was the right thing to do. Maybe it was wrong—maybe she would fail—maybe she was no good. They would yell at her, laugh at her.

The girl stopped, though, when she felt the slight weight of the bag hanging at her hip. She shifted the collection of gem shards that she’d painstakingly collected, by hook or by crook, in front of her.

“Hi...yah!”

Compared to the speed of the attacking serpent, the girl’s own entry was agonizingly, pitifully slow. Although it hadn’t been her intention, this left her confronted with the monster’s wide-open jaws. As its mouth filled her vision, the girl struck out with the weapon in her left hand.

“JJJJJJJJJJJJJJJJJJJJ!!!!!!”

“Heek...?!”

It didn’t hurt.

There was a *shing!* and numbness ran up her arm, and the girl was thrown backward onto her behind. In front of her, the serpent was twisting its neck, not knowing what to do with the bent dagger lodged in its mouth. The strange shape prevented the serpent from either spitting it out or swallowing it; the weapon stayed stuck between its jaws.

A perfect opportunity. An opening. The girl was having no such elevated thoughts. Instead, she got unsteadily to her feet, then screwed up her courage and started forward at a pattering run. “Yaaahh...!”

She jumped past the serpent as if she were a tiny rabbit.

“JJJJJ!!!!”

She charged headlong, never looking to either side and certainly never looking back. The hissing from behind terrified her.

I guess I don’t have to actually kill it...maybe?

Possibly. The thoughts ran quickly through her head as she dashed along, trying not to slip and fall. If she'd done something wrong, surely one of the contest facilitators would have shown up and stopped her. Since they didn't, that meant she hadn't done anything wrong.

She continued to run, and then she discovered something strange, deep in the darkness of the cleft. At first, it looked like a big stone altar. But as she got closer, as the thing came into better view, she saw that it was a funerary urn... No, wait. In fact, it was a sarcophagus made of stone; even the girl could tell.

She desperately wanted to stop, but she could hear the serpent slithering behind her. Feeling as if she might burst into tears (indeed, she was beginning to sniffle already), the girl neared the sarcophagus, looking pathetic.

Maybe this was the end of the quest. Or maybe there was more. She hoped it was the end. She wanted to leave.

When the girl reached the sarcophagus, though, she noticed something odd. It was a coffin, all right (she couldn't read the letters carved on it, of course)—but it was empty. The lid was slightly ajar, and there was a single long, thin depression inside. She was just wondering if maybe it had once held a wand or a staff when:

“Hoh! I never imagined, to be quite honest, that anyone would make it this far.”

He appeared from thin air as if in a puff of smoke and flame: a corpulent man who seemed to bubble up out of nowhere. He wore a robe that even the girl could tell was of fine make, and in his hand, he held a terrible whip of woven steel.

“I see this seal was rather too forgiving for your kind.”

Fixed with the glinting light of the man's glare, the girl couldn't speak but only shuffled backward. To her, he looked like nothing so much as a terrifying flame demon or some such.

I guess I really was wrong to run away from the snake, she thought, shaking from fear.

I suppose he could be called a fire goblin.

“GOOROOGOROGROG!!”

ZAP! ZAP! ZAPPA!!

Each time the goblin waved his staff, the chamber was filled with searing light. Lightning bolts, pillars of flame, and heat rays came flying, scorching the rock where they landed. Goblin Slayer didn't know much about magic, but he didn't believe a mere goblin spell caster could use that many spells at a time.

It must be the staff, then. Goblin Slayer, the stink of melted minerals all around him, decided to abandon his cover.

The goblins must have laughed when they saw the warrior in his pathetic armor come diving out from behind the mass of stone. He looked as overwhelmed as a hunted hare taking flight in fear (not that the goblins had ever seen a hare). They would never let him get out of the cave. The hail of arrows, and the magic, would destroy him first.

The goblin waving the staff—which was to say the “fire goblin”—kicked out to rebuke one of his foolish lackeys...

“GOORGB?!”

But he was blinded by the brains of that very subordinate, which came flying into his face. He kicked away the corpse, which had an unexpected crack in its skull, spitting the filth out of his mouth and dropping to his hands and knees. What had happened? What had been done to him?

No matter what that stupid adventurer tried, he would never be able to attack from across the chasm. It wasn't fair. It was low-down dirty. A nasty little trick—he'd pulled some low-blow stunt, that was for sure!

“Now... How many was that?”

The goblin was absolutely correct.

In his right hand, Goblin Slayer held Guild Girl's decorative sash. A goblin could never have imagined the role it had played.

Racing among the arrows that came whooshing in, Goblin Slayer grabbed up a stone in his free hand, tucking it into the sash. His right hand became a

soundless blur.

“Let’s call it—two!” The next stone he slung flew with remarkable speed and force, cracking open the skull of another goblin. He didn’t even watch the corpse as it tumbled back among its companions, still twitching. He couldn’t have seen it anyway. The flashes of light burned his eyes, widened as they were by the eye drops.

But it wasn’t a problem for him.

So long as they don’t change targets, I can get a good sense of where the archers are. In between heat-ray bursts, the goblins kept up the storm of arrows. The shooters’ locations practically revealed themselves. He understood very well why his party member, the high elf girl, was always running around the battlefield while she fired. A sniper who had given away their location had given up half of their threat.

Then again, the whole reason the elf could shoot while running and jumping was probably because she *was* an elf. To even consider comparing her to some goblins was an insult to her.

“Three! ...Four!”

“GOOROGBB?!”

“GORG?! GBB?!”

It was like shooting fish in a barrel. Every time Goblin Slayer’s sling sang out, another goblin’s head was crushed. There wasn’t much height difference between their positions, and luckily, he already had a good grasp of the distance. The goblins thoughtlessly stood on the very edge of the cleft, leaning out to take aim at him. Even without his sight, it would have been hard for him to miss.

Perhaps because he had just been thinking of her, he found himself remembering something High Elf Archer often said.

“You know, when elves shoot...”

““...they don’t do it with the hand but with the heart.”” He seemed to recall her adding that those who relied on mere physical skill to shoot had forgotten

the faces of their ancestors. *And she's right.*

The goblins who lived down in this dungeon or these ruins or this cave or whatever it was—they weren't fools, but they *were* stupid. Maybe it was because of the magic staff and the arrows. They were clearly not thinking. Even at this moment, he doubted they understood: A grenade is a human's friend.

Throughout recorded history, no race had been so obsessed with throwing farther, faster, and harder than humans had. In all the Four-Cornered World, only humans threw things as an offensive tactic. Thus, humans knew. As his father had. As his sister had. As she had taught him.

If you have a single sling, you can cross this distance as if it were not there.

He would show those goblins just how much of a threat one human with a sling could be.

“GOOROGB?!”

“GBBOB!”

Only now did it seem to be dawning on the goblins that they would be killed if things went on this way. They scattered left and right, desperate to flee or else to use their companions as shields.

“GROGBB! GOOROOGBB!!” The fire goblin, irate, used one turn to calm his troops, then waved his staff and ran. The ensuing flash of light burned Goblin Slayer's eyes, but he wasn't about to complain. He trusted his instincts, honed to find the height of a goblin's head, and let a stone fly.

“GOROOGBB!!” There was a scream but also another flash of light. At the same moment, Goblin Slayer leaped forward and rolled. He heard the sound of something singeing and caught an unpleasant odor. There was no pain. He continued forward, picking up a stone.

As if I care.

Let the enemy fling every spell they had at him—if they didn't hit him, it didn't matter. The same was true of him, of course, but in that case, he would simply fling as many hundreds, as many thousands of stones as it took.

Goblin Slayer ran along the cleft side, parallel to the fire goblin, picking up his

next stone.

I have all the ammunition I need.

The air was filled with wild bursts of heat, arrows, and flying stones, as Goblin Slayer was silhouetted against the flashing dark.

§

The whip cracked, and she felt a burning heat. Her skin felt like it was on fire.

The girl couldn't budge an inch, of course, couldn't even open her mouth, let alone try to run. Her legs were trembling violently, and her heart was pounding in her chest; she found it hard to breathe, and her sword felt impossibly heavy.

Seeing that it was all the girl could do to remain standing, the flame demon said mockingly, "All right, girl. Perhaps you would be so kind as to tell me your name?"

"Ahh, umm..." She offered him her name in a whisper. She knew that a wizard who learned your name might be able to curse you.

The corpulent man narrowed his eyes with interest, studying the girl's face. "Hoh. A name like a tempest. A brave name that could course through the primordial soup."

That wasn't true. The girl shook her head, hardly understanding what she was denying.

"And what brings you here, I wonder? What are you seeking? Treasure? Glory? A legend of your own?"

This has to be the final test. The girl tried to think desperately of the right thing to say, but she had no idea what it might be. The demon's piercing gaze as she stood there silently, fidgeting and thinking, though, was almost unbearable.

"An a-ad—," the girl whispered. "Adventurer... I w-want to be...an adventurer."

She could hardly believe she had gotten the words out. The girl looked at the ground, disconsolate: They seemed so banal.

Once she had spoken, though, the words started coming in fits and starts.

How her mercenary father was only ever drinking or angry or asleep. How she hardly knew her own mother's face. She had no friends. No connections with the professional guilds that might have gotten her a job. How if she didn't make a change, nothing would change.

She spoke of her filthy house. Being alone with her father. The cold stares the villagers turned on them. How that was the full extent of her world.

She said she simply couldn't take it, that it was unbearable. And there was only one thing to do about it. Become an adventurer—there was nothing else, was there?

"Hoh. I see, I see." The man, who had been listening silently, rested against the stone sarcophagus, his chin in his hands. "Your life is so grand it took you all that time to get it all out. My life, by comparison, hardly warrants a few words."

"...?" The girl was perplexed.

"I did that which should not be done. As a result, my flesh was stolen from me, and I am as you see me now, only a spirit. But I have in my hand proof of my power."

"Um..." The girl thought as hard and as fast as she could and said, "Is it...a gemstone...by any chance?"

"Indeed it is!" The man's eyes glittered, and the girl swallowed heavily. *I knew this must be the final test.*

"It is the very evidence of my strength. Even the gods cannot take it from me. Those pitiful beings envy my power..."

Smirking, the man chattered on as if he and the girl were quite friendly with each other, but most of what he said went over her head. How could she understand magic and gods, spirits and flesh? She wasn't listening to the man so much as she was desperately trying to think of what she should do.

She had to get the gem. She'd come this far. There had to be a way. Somehow.

I wonder if there's a hint in the stuff he's saying?

Maybe she should have been paying attention after all. And yet...she had a

sneaking suspicion none of his chatter meant very much.

“...And there you have it. That’s just the summary version, but at least it’s nice to know I haven’t lost my knack for a good monologue after all that sleep.”

Could it be—? Did the girl realize that *was* the right answer?

“Thank you for listening. You may die now.”

“_____...?!”

It allowed her to react immediately when the man raised the whip in his hand. It wasn’t precisely graceful enough to be called a purposeful dive out of the way. It was more like a panicked stumble to one side, followed by a fall.

“JJJJJ...!”

At the same moment, the giant snake, which had slithered up from behind, shook its tail and bared its fangs at the man. Even the girl hadn’t been thinking about the snake anymore—to the flame demon, it came as a total surprise.

“Grrr...?! What are you doing, you overgrown worm...?!” The man’s deathly glare, which had been fixed on the girl, was now turned on this unthinking, brutish reptile. The snake, already angered that someone was trying to snatch its prey from it, only grew more enraged.

The man’s whip lashed out and struck the snake, which was enveloped in flame even as it flew through the air. This had to be related to the spell the man had mumbled to himself.

“JJJJJJJJ...?!”

So this was what it meant to be burned to a crisp. The girl huddled down, watching as the great serpent turned to a mere shadow in the air and then simply disappeared. There was no smoke, not even so much as a stench.

The man looked down at the girl, laughing. “You said you wanted my gemstone, *child*. Did you think I was just a fool who let his staff be stolen by a goblin, hmm?”

The girl couldn’t talk. Only the occasional *heek* or *ohh* escaped her. That seemed to put the man in a good mood, for he covered the distance between them in a couple of loping strides. “An *army* would not be enough to defeat me!

What can a single small girl like you do?”

He was right. She’d never thought she could beat him. She didn’t even know what she should be doing at that moment. Thus, when the flame demon leered down at her triumphantly, there was nothing she could say to him.

“A pointless life, yours. But at least you can gratify me with your howls of shame!”

—————...

The girl, though, felt something cold enter her heart. True, she was scared, terrified. She wanted to leave. Participating in the contest might have been a mistake. And yet...

I’m also kind of...mad.

She understood that she was helpless and pitiful. She knew that already. No one had to tell her. That’s why she was trying so hard. Or at least *trying* to try. And even after all that trying, this was how she had ended up. She got it.

But to have someone point and laugh about it? That, she couldn’t accept. People told her she was nothing. If she made one simple mistake, everyone laughed at her. They thought she should stay helpless and pitiful her entire life, that she shouldn’t even try to change anything.

She understood that the contest facilitator playing the demon was only acting a part. But there were limits to what she could take. Where did this guy get off talking so big? He was just as scared of the snake as she had been. They weren’t so different.

In fact, hadn’t he said his staff had been stolen? By a goblin? By a *goblin*!

Even I was able to beat those goblins.

The cold thing worked its way down into her stomach, at which point it began to boil instead.

Those goblins hadn’t been easy, but she’d won. What right did he have to make fun of her?

“.....” Silently, uncertainly, she set down her bag, opened it, and reached in.

“Hmm? What’s this—going to beg for your life? Ha-ha-ha! Think you’re going to offer me a fur-lined boot?” The demon’s expression was full of the certainty of victory. The victory of one who enjoyed crushing someone else’s futile but entertaining resistance under his thumb.

His face merged with others in her mind, ugly faces, and without a word, the girl whipped her arm forward.

“Hngh...?!” the man cried as the air around him filled with a red powder, getting into his face, causing him to stumble backward.

The snake had scared him, which made her think all that talk of being a spirit or whatever was just that, talk—and that maybe this would startle him as well. Ignoring the tingling in her fingers, the girl dove for the shadows of the rocks near the cleft wall.

“Grr, I tried to take it easy on you, and you let it go to your head! ...Well, I’ll show you how puny you really are!”

The sky (which wasn’t really a sky) above began to crackle and flash, perhaps because of the man’s anger. The girl started trembling involuntarily, but she forced herself to peek past the stones at him. He appeared to have lost track of her; he was holding his face with one hand and flinging his whip around with the other.

What should I do? The girl thought as hard as she could. Should she cut him down? *Could* she defeat him with her sword? She highly doubted it.

She pulled out the unfamiliar potion. Still too afraid to drink it, she threw it instead.

“Arrgh, tricky little...!”

It was no good. She heard the bottle shatter, but that was all. Meaning...

I guess...this is my only chance.

It was all she had. If this didn’t work, she would just have to surrender and ask him to show her the way back outside.

She bit her lip, closed her eyes, and lunged out from behind her cover.

“Hrm! So that’s where you were, you little vixen! Prepare to di—”

The flame demon's eyes widened when he saw the scroll the girl was grasping in both hands. Did she know what she was holding? Was she trying to threaten him? No. No, it couldn't be.

His mind was flooded with all the knowledge of great spells he'd acquired throughout his life. He remembered particularly those his mentor had warned him sternly against but at which he had laughed, thinking that with *his* genius, he could surely master them.

There were many taboos, many forbidden arts in the Four-Cornered World, but only three of them could bend dimensions. Gate, which could open an ultimate door across time and space through sheer power of will. Fusion Blast, which drew on the power of the Demon Core. And this, the last of them...

"Yah!" cried the ignorant girl, her voice almost comically high-pitched, as she undid the seal on the scroll.

"Stop! That's the Star of Muala—!!"

He said nothing more, for he could not speak. The girl had no idea what had happened. She knew only that there was a burst of light, so bright it pierced her eyeballs even with her eyes shut tight, along with a deafening roar and a great shaking. She curled up and pressed her hands to her ears as stones rained down on her.

It was so bright it was as if the sun had risen inside the cave. The shaking was as though a giant had given the cave his hardest smack. But the light and the sound, and even the wind that came rushing through after, lasted only an instant. The girl, though, had to fall to her hands and knees against the shock wave, and she stayed that way for a long time.

Only when it was all over did she realize she'd tossed the scroll away. She slowly opened her eyes to see—nothing.

There was nothing there.

The flame demon was gone, and there was no trace of the stone sarcophagus. Only a crater in the earth as if something massive had fallen on them.

"Was...was that...the right thing to do...?" Still not remotely sure, the girl put her bag on her back and peered around the cleft. From a broken place in the

wall, she spotted something glittering and rushed toward it. She almost stumbled, scraping her hand again as she caught herself against the ground, but she kept making a beeline for the sparkle.

Despite the scrapes, there was a smile on her face, for she soon realized what she had discovered. It was a chunk of black onyx, more beautiful than anything she had ever seen.

§

At that moment, utterly unexpectedly, the dice of Fate and Chance intervened.

“Hngh...!”

“GOROGB...?!”

The sudden shaking was quite familiar to Goblin Slayer, but the goblin had never experienced such a thing. It was the impact of two points in space being pressed together like dots on a folded piece of paper. But even Goblin Slayer was seeing the effects up close for the first time.

A rent formed in thin air in the cave, and a great, burning chunk of heavy metal came falling down with a roar. A fireball—a firestone from heaven—no, somehow, it was a shooting star...!

The decisive action took place at that moment. Goblin Slayer saw the beam of light. Sought its true form, thought about how to react. Or perhaps he was simply transfixed by its beauty. Even he wasn't sure.

But not the goblin. The bright, burning thing was scary, no more and no less. What's more, he knew that he, too, had bright, burning, scary things. So he was not afraid. In fact, it gave him a baseless confidence that he could do that, too.

When Goblin Slayer froze in place, the fire goblin waved his staff gleefully. He wasn't aiming at anything in particular. He was like a child waving a toy. Nonetheless, the fate of one who faces down a shooting star is effectively sealed.

Magical power swirled around the goblin's staff; Goblin Slayer gave a click of his tongue and prepared to dive out of the way. Everything came down to that

instant, to the pips on the dice of Fate and Chance rolled by the gods...

“GOROGB...?!”

No—

The staff slipped from the goblin’s fingers. It was the kind of mistake only a stupid goblin could make, but it was awfully convenient.

The goblin’s eyes went wide as if he couldn’t believe what had happened, but Goblin Slayer didn’t hesitate for a second. He jumped back, rolled forward, stood, and prepared to strike all in a single fluid motion.

There was no stone in his hand, but the fire goblin no longer had his staff, either. The two opponents stared each other down, focused only on their foe, the light and explosion of the shooting star distant to them.

“GOROGG...”

“_____”

They stood face-to-face, neither saying a word. Which of them was faster? That was the question that would settle this fight. That and nothing else. There was nothing else.

The fire goblin looked from his staff to the enemy on the far side of the cliff and back again. The accursed adventurer had only a silly, small shield; one hand was hidden, and he watched the goblin from down on one knee. All his armor, his helmet, his shield, and everything else would be meaningless before the light of the goblin’s magic.

The goblin didn’t understand exactly who or what his enemy was, but he was playing some little trick with his sling and some stones. The goblin wouldn’t give him the time. He had to find a stone, put it in his sling, take aim, and fire. It took forever. The goblin would leap for his staff and wave it around. That would be enough to kill his opponent. The adventurer would surely die. The goblin would be victorious.

A hideous smile began to spread over the goblin’s face. In his mind, his victory was already assured; he saw only his own triumph. He would make spawn with many women, kick them, make them cry and scream, and then he would eat

them. All the other goblins, and then all the humans and everyone else, would bow to him, would offer everything to him. It was his natural right after all that he had suffered, the goblin believed. And it was only fitting that he, who had emerged brilliant and strong despite his trials, should claim that right.

Let his enemy hide behind his shield and mutter to himself—the goblin saw through him, saw that it was just a ruse.

The fire goblin didn't hesitate. He kicked powerfully off the ground, lunging for his staff. He grabbed it, held it fast, waved it, and pointed it at his enemy.

What he saw, at the end of this surprising display of agility, was indeed an adventurer on one knee. The adventurer saw the goblin through his visor, then his right hand shot out toward the creature.

“GOROGBB?”

There was a gentle thump, and the goblin's head snapped back, his eyes drawn by a colorful ribbon. For some reason he didn't understand, his strength left him, his arms and legs twitching helplessly as the world seemed to turn upside down. The staff slipped from his fingers again, rolling toward the edge of the cliff.

The fire goblin—no, now he was just a goblin—sought desperately for his *precious*. Perhaps it was his good luck that he didn't see it swallowed up by the heat of the burning stone. Or perhaps his fate was less fortunate than that of the rhea who was destroyed along with his own precious possession.

“Fifteen.”

Whatever the case, the goblin died without ever knowing that it was a metal stylus lodged between his eyebrows. Only a human would ever have imagined that the projectile, with a fluttering tail attached, could fly so far. And only Goblin Slayer would have known that a lone stylus could silently kill a goblin.

He still had many other ways to kill goblins without making a sound, as well.

“...Hrm.” He stood up, letting out a breath. This whole commotion was no one's fault in particular. It was the doing of goblins and his own failure. It appeared, though, that he had at least managed to clean up the mess. Well, not quite: He hadn't yet found the missing adventurer. So the battle wasn't over,

and the only way to go was forward.

He glanced around the area, taking note of the puddles of protein-laced water and the ruined teeth that floated therein.

Still, I had a great many helpers.

“All right,” he said with a dismissive snort. “The first question is how to get down...”

§

“So the debt’s repaid.”

“Listen...”

In a corner of the dungeon, Warlock heaved a sigh and rubbed her brow. The commotion that had engulfed the end of the dungeon exploration contest was far away, but still it seemed to pound in her head. Her fingers and toes were slightly numb, as if something was holding them fast, and her eyes were tingly and dry. Her clothes, meanwhile, were slick with sweat, sticking unpleasantly to her; there was something cold in her stomach that felt like it was trying to work its way back up her throat. She’d had to make eyes in her brain and control two bodies at once, after all. There was nothing quite like it.

“...right at this moment, I couldn’t feel worse. It’s like I chugged three beers without stopping.” She felt downright nauseated.

“Like you just lay down for a nap at the inn and woke to find yourself strung up on the gallows.”

“I hate how accurate that analogy is.” Warlock frowned at the elf beside her, who smelled like face-whitening powder.

“You know, it can be a pretty bad way to go if you get someone incompetent doing the job.”

“Huh,” Warlock replied morosely. She was glad she’d finally gotten a rise out of the calm, cool woman, but she didn’t have the energy to be pleased.

“You want to find out what it’s like if you get someone competent?”

“I’d rather eat an ant-meat bun.” Warlock brushed the face powder away and

closed her eyes, leaning against the wall. It wasn't like it had been such a big deal. Not a big deal at all. Just one simple Fumble spell.

Equivalent exchange was assuredly *not* the principle on which the world worked, but as much as she hated to admit it, she'd owed that person a lot, hadn't she? And when she'd been asked to help in interest of repaying the debt, the idea of saying no had felt, well...*bad*, hadn't it? Besides, she'd never seen them bow their head in supplication to anyone before, and she'd accepted before she knew what she was doing.

It didn't mean anything more than that. It was that simple.

"Man... Sure am tired, though..."

She wanted to fall asleep right where she was, but she couldn't. They still had to clean up, wind things down, change, and then finally go home. Why were there so many things to do just to get a little rest? It wasn't fair. When it came to her party, after all, the others—their leader, the monk, and the scout—all had their problems. Warlock was stuck doing all the thinking.

Yeesh. Unreal. They could stand to give her a little more respect. And maybe a little more money to buy spell books. Honestly.

She wanted to know who the idiot was. The idiot who had used Meteor Strike in the middle of a building like this.

Mumble, mumble; complain, complain. The elf woman smiled affably as Warlock grumbled. Maybe, Warlock thought, she really would strip her down in bed or the bath sometime. It was probably the fatigue talking.

Whatever, I don't care. I just want to get home and have something to eat and then go to sleep.

She forgot everything else, letting a little yawn escape her.

§

It turned out to be easier than Goblin Slayer had expected to descend the cleft face. He had stripped the goblins of their clothes, tied the rags together, and found he had enough to improvise a rope. He secured it firmly to a particularly sturdy-looking stalagmite, then let himself down the cliff, where he

discovered drifting white fog.

He scanned the area carefully; the effects of the eye drops had worn off by now. He was in a bowl-shaped crater; for some reason, there was glass on the ground at his feet. Thankfully, he'd chosen the material for his boot soles carefully, so he wasn't worried about his footing. He was surprised, though; he hadn't realized there had been something like this here...

"Mm."

The girl was there, too. Standing flummoxed at the bottom of the cleft face, trying to decide how to get up. After a moment, she appeared to steel herself, then grabbed onto the stone wall, reaching out, scrambling for hand-and footholds.

"The exit is this way."

"Eep...?!" The girl slipped off the wall and landed smack on her bottom. Goblin Slayer had called out to her because what she was doing had looked dangerous, but it probably would have ended the same way even if he hadn't spoken.

The girl huddled there for a moment, unable to move, then got unsteadily to her feet. She seemed to be managing the pain. She wiped her face with her sleeve, then worked her way over to where Goblin Slayer waited silently.

"U-um..."

First things first: She appeared unharmed. No injuries, and her clothes weren't torn. Her face and equipment were filthy, obviously put through their paces, and her hair was everywhere—she looked pathetic. But safe.

"I—I found this. Here...!"

In her face and in her hands, there was a spark. A tiny shard of stone that she clutched as if it were treasure she'd earned fighting a dragon. To Goblin Slayer, it looked like no more than a black pebble, but it did have a luster.

The girl was obviously nervous, but she was looking straight at him. She'd been through the trials of the contest. It was clear in her eyes that she believed firmly and without doubt that she'd completed the adventure.

Goblin Slayer grunted softly, then fell silent. Then, he said the only appropriate thing: “Well done.”

“...Thank you!” The girl’s formerly closed face opened into a smile, and he heard her murmur, “I did it!”

Goblin Slayer glanced at her and said, “Let’s get out of here.”

Climbing the rope, the girl looked much the same as she had trying to climb the wall itself. She always looked like she was in real danger—but she also displayed genuine strength and did indeed make the top of the cleft.

As for Goblin Slayer, he ascended quickly, with a skill born of years of experience. When he reached the top, he said, “You’re good at that.”

“I was always good at climbing trees,” the girl replied shyly.

“I see,” he replied with a nod. Then they proceeded through the cave, Goblin Slayer trying to find the path that would be easiest for the girl to follow.

Eventually, the effect of the eye drops wore off entirely—and then it occurred to him that the girl couldn’t see in the dark. He dug in his item pouch, remembered that he’d lost most of what had been in it, including his torch, and grunted quietly. He tried Guild Girl’s bag instead but found only the bottle of perfume oil.

After a moment’s thought, he said to the girl, “Do you still have your lantern?”

“...Y-yes,” she answered, her voice small. “But...I ran out of oil.”

“Let me have it.”

The girl obediently set down her bag, took off the lantern hanging to the side of it, and handed it to him. Goblin Slayer carefully poured the perfume oil into it, then lit the fire with a practiced hand. The girl watched with interest, her face bathed in orange light. She couldn’t help smiling at the faint sweet aroma that drifted from the lantern. “Smells nice,” she said quietly.

“It’s not suited for adventuring.” Goblin Slayer stood slowly. The girl quickly followed suit, pulling her bag onto her back. “But it does have a calming effect,” he added, his lips turning up ever so slightly inside his helmet. He told the girl to

turn around, then hung the lantern from her pack.

“Oh,” she said, shyly at first, but then continued with, “Th-thank...you.”

Then the two of them set out once more on the way, at once long and short, to the exit. Among the stretching shadows, they talked—well, mostly the girl talked.

“I think that last facilitator was a little...mean.”

“Is that so?”

“...He said some really unkind things.”

“Did he?”

“He did!”

The girl chatted energetically, even though she must’ve been dead tired. She talked about how many traps there had been. About her fight with the goblins. About how the goblin had grabbed her cap. How she’d somehow managed to succeed. She flitted from subject to subject, sometimes speaking of her father back in her village, sometimes of the adventurers she’d met in the armor shop.

There were a great many things Goblin Slayer should have said to her. All she’d done was go off the intended route, get lost in a goblin nest, and wander around for a while. She didn’t realize anything had been going on besides what she told him.

But those were the facts. She hadn’t actually succeeded in the dungeon exploration contest at all. It would have been easy to tell her so. To tell her the truth and leave all her so-called success a waste would have been the work of a moment.

But that would be bullshit.

He knew that compared to the girl’s adventure, the facts he possessed were of no value. Nor did he wish to become the kind of person who would find value in them. Let those around him do so. As for him, he only hunted goblins.

The fact that they had escaped was because of their strength as adventurers—not just his but hers, too.



The cave heaved with fleshy masses, packed in tight.

Ugh, it's alive.

She could practically hear her sanity being shaved away: It was remarkably pleasant. For better or for worse, the king's younger sister had had such an experience before, although she had never quite been plunged into insanity.

"What the heck is that?!" she squealed, plastering herself against the wall of the high cliff.

"Yeah, ha-ha, it's a big one this time. Not as big as Hecatoncheir, though," Sword Saint said, laughing merrily. Even in her blue leather armor, she looked proud and imposing. Her smile as the stinking wind tossed her hair around was like that of a beast baring its fangs.

She drew the copper sword—it turned out to be a copper scimitar—on her back, the blade gleaming dangerously. Compared to the writhing mass of flesh, though, it looked no larger or more threatening than a needle.

"Are you sure about this?!"

"Thing looks like it's alive, so I just have to keep slicing until it dies."

No big deal. Well, the king's younger sister thought it seemed like a big deal, but she kept any further objections to herself.

"It's Jupiter's Ghost," Sage, likewise pressing herself against the cliff wall, murmured softly. Beneath her pink hood, the king's younger sister could see that her doll-like face was drawn and pale. Not because of the lump of flesh, bulging with veins and nerves, that threatened to crush them against the wall. She'd noticed it ever since they'd set foot on this treacherous ground.

"If we have to jump...do you think we'll make it?!"

"I would rather not have to find out... Using Falling Control while also

maintaining four Other Self spells would be immensely taxing,” Sage said. Then she added, “That was a joke,” but the king’s younger sister, it’s fair to say, wasn’t laughing.

In some sense, this is pretty much my first adventure, right?! she thought. Her journey into the Dungeon of the Dead had been by kidnapping, then the Deathtrap Dungeon as part of the dungeon exploration contest—and finally this.

“Among the magic words of true power is a spell called Other Self,” Sage said quietly, ignoring the young woman’s state of mind. The king’s younger sister was familiar with this spell. At that very moment, all of the other selves up on the surface were thanks to Sage’s use of this magic.

It was like those goblins—they, too, had been called forth by some complicated magic.

“There was once one who thought that if they had their double incant Other Self, they would produce ever more powerful versions of themselves.”

“And did they really try it?” Where Sage spoke softly, Hero’s voice (she was dressed in green) seemed to bounce off the walls. Although her footing was no steadier than that of the rest of them, she looked as safe and comfortable as a child walking along a neighborhood fence.

“It was the height of foolishness.” Sage looked down with utter derision at the mass of flesh below them—if her words were true, the remains of that wizard.

The double had had the same thought as its master and used Other Self again. Then *its* double had done the same thing. From there, they’d continued replicating endlessly. The doubles had ultimately crushed the original, and with no consciousness of their own, they’d continued using Other Self. Chanting the spell would be to their advantage. It would make them stronger. So chant it they did. On and on. Forever.

“And this is what got us.”

The foolish mage suffered a heavenly erratum. The price he paid was tremendous—to him. But to the Four-Cornered World itself, it was trivial: the soul of a single spell user. The danger that remained, however, certainly

couldn't be taken lightly.

"There's no question—that thing will one day swallow the Four-Cornered World whole."

Soon the goblins would be caught up in the spell, the lump of flesh using them for food even as it continued to expand.

The search for profit, the pursuit of knowledge: These were the endeavors of sentient peoples. They were the driving force that had brought the monkeys and the beasts spoken of by the lizardmen to this point. Before they had been beasts, they had been fish living in the ocean—and even before that, they had been primordial ooze.

Imagine if that ooze had gotten its proverbial hands on unlimited power equal to that of a dragon or some such creature.

"..." Sage continued to stare silently down at the hideous lump that was now all that remained of the wizard. Left unchecked, the thing would bury the Four-Cornered World, not stopping until it had consumed every world and realm. Maybe it was the product of its persistence that after long months and years, it had finally arrived at its own sealed resting place.

Neither Sage, nor Hero, nor the king's younger sister could fathom the will or desire of the soulless hunk of meat.

Then there was Sword Saint, who had no interest in grasping such things. "So we just have to kill it before it can do that, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Hero replied, her lips pursed.

"O Holy Earth Mother..."

The king's younger sister began chanting from the depths of her heart, as every sight and every situation around her seemed beyond imagining. These three fine people with her were always fighting their way through such adventures. Now that she was with them, she couldn't just stand around screaming in panic. *That wouldn't look very cool, for one thing!*

Her friends were up on the surface. She was, admittedly, once again having an adventure on the sly. But her own older brother had told her that at times like

this, the only thing to do was grin and go for it.

“Magic’s tough, huh...!” the king’s younger sister said, clutching her sounding staff and grinning desperately.

“Absolutely,” Sage agreed, smiling a little herself. “Because spells are magic—in other words, miracles.”

Thus, truly great sages hardly ever used magic. Thus, too, it was by the direction of the very gods that the king’s younger sister was here at this moment.

“I’ve heard Jupiter’s Ghost brings disaster...” Even as she spoke, the princess was quickly going through a wide range of holy scripture in her mind, bringing her soul closer to the heavens. Doing so made one a link between heaven and earth, so one had to be careful not to get too excited all at once...

Half watching her, Sword Saint said, “You’re saying this thing down here is the reason the western frontier has been...?”

“The chicken and the egg,” Sage replied, bringing her staff to bear and turning her consciousness to her arts. “No one knows which came first.”

“Well, I sure hope it was this thing!” Sword Saint replied, gamely raising her weapon. (Her logic seemed a little bit off.)

“I wanna say, I really meant to just hang out and enjoy the contest,” Hero remarked.

“When things have gotten this far, the Hero has to buck up and do her job.” *Like how I’ve tried to do since I got caught up in this.*

Hero shrugged at the king’s younger sister’s words. “When you put it that way, guess I’ve got no choice—can’t let us get beat now!” *Just like always.* Hero grinned and leaped into the fray, her black hair streaming behind her.

The party brimmed with fighting spirit—compared to them, the king’s younger sister seemed to have scant power indeed. *There’s not much I can do,* she thought. All the more reason to do it with every ounce of her strength and her heart. Letting the heroes do all the work while she sat in safety and comfort—she’d always hated that and still did.

“O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, please, by your revered hand, cleanse this land!”

She felt her soul enveloped by a gentle hand, as if she were being embraced by a loving mother. It was all right. Everything would be okay. There was no question in her mind.

The king’s younger sister glared at the lump of flesh before her. It wasn’t just about strength or effectiveness; those weren’t everything. They absolutely were not. That was why she was here, and the other women—that was why Hero was here.

“Gah, man! I wish we could do *one* adventure that doesn’t involve the fate of the world...!” Hero said.

“If that’s what you want...,” Sword Saint began, and Sage finished for her:

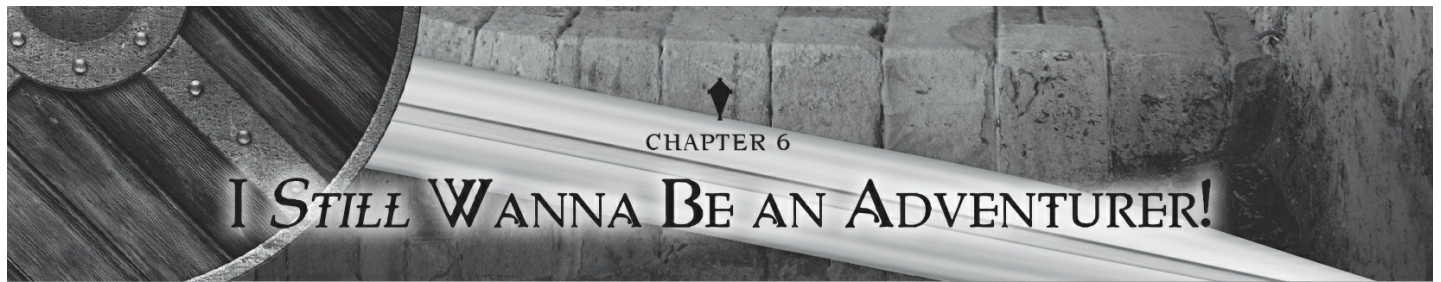
“...then we must begin by saving the world.”

“Guess so...! I just knew it!” the girl, Hero, cried, and then she thrust her hand high into the air. So long as her absolute weapon, bound to her soul, was in the same dimension, it would appear in her hand instantaneously.

It was a green enchanted blade that seemed to contain the light of the sun. Her absolute weapon.

Hero grasped it firmly, then leaped into space.

“Strike...of the Sun!!”



“Hey, you were in there, too, little lady? How was it?”

“Total loss!”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. But, well, I did get to have an adventure, and I had fun, so maybe it’s okay.”

Under a clear blue sky, the girl with the iron spear across her shoulders laughed out loud. The expression on her face was as bright and refreshing as the wind that made her green outfit flutter—not a cloud in sight.

“I gotcha,” Spearman said when he saw it. *Looks like this event of theirs went pretty well*, he thought. Winter would soon be upon them, but the frontier town was bathed in the festive afterglow of the contest. People looked excited as they walked along, and conversations could be heard here and there about the contest. Young men and women chatted about whether they had participated and whether it had gone well for them or not.

There was even talk of treating promising youngsters from nearby towns as guests, giving them complimentary food and lodging. It seemed to Spearman that they had much to look forward to in the new crop of adventurers who would show up the coming spring. He didn’t regret not being involved in the contest, but it stung a little—a sign that it had been a good event.

Thought I might feel all depressed, failing my mission while everyone else was doing theirs. But...

It helped his mood that the young woman in front of him showed not the slightest sign of regret herself. She would become a good adventurer, he was sure—at the very least, she had one of the most necessary talents for it. Of course an adventurer who failed at their adventure felt bad and maybe got depressed. When life knocked them down, a lot of people gave up. But there was nothing inevitable about that. It was each individual’s choice. The strength

of spirit to come bouncing back after a failure wasn't an easy thing to come by.

He seemed to keep running into the rookie girl, with whom his acquaintance had begun from such a small thing. Seeing her so full of heart couldn't help but bring a smile to Spearman's face.

"How about you? How'd you do?"

The girl's innocent question made him wince. "We hit the ruins where there was supposed to be an immortal body and soul or something." He scratched his head, offering an unaffected but disappointed grin. It wasn't untrue. He was just trying to put the best possible spin on it. "But all we found down there was an empty husk."

"Another dead end, huh?"

"Pretty much." He nodded, then reached out and mussed the girl's black hair. She squealed (adorable), but she wasn't unhappy about it. To be able to innocently touch a girl's hair like that, you had to have known her for quite a while. "Heck," Spearman said, "that's adventuring for you. Can't let it get you down, right?"

"Sure can't!" The girl found time to shoot a look in Spearman's direction as she busied herself with straightening her hair, pouting a little.

The blue-clad swordswoman standing over there, and the wizard in the pink robe with her, must be the girl's party members. They made quite a sight—but Spearman wasn't sure. He had the distinct sense that their equipment didn't reflect their true abilities. Meaning, of course, that the gear wasn't as good as they were...

Well, nothing he had to worry about. It was just a passing thought, maybe because a young woman who looked a lot like a priestess he knew was standing with them, chatting and laughing.

Priestess came running up to the girl, joining in the laughter and the conversation, the talk blooming like a beautiful flower. It would've been easy to take the two for sisters, but Spearman wasn't about to make that mistake. Just because they were wearing the same religious vestments didn't mean you couldn't tell the difference between the two young women—it was palpable.

Whatever a woman wore or whatever she did, it didn't change the fact that she was beautiful. Spearman thought that was a good thing. Beside him, his partner, Witch, smiled pointedly about something. Well, she was always doing that.

The way a young girl came walking through the door of the Adventurers Guild, clearly nervous—that was perfectly ordinary, too. All of it seemed like another typical day in the town on the western frontier.

§

“Hey, you!”

By this time, he was well accustomed to running errands in town. The first time, his parents had lavished praise on him, and the other kids had been duly impressed, but by now no one really reacted anymore.

What's more, today he was going with his father, though he'd been told his dad had something important to discuss, so the boy should wait outside, and then he'd been left there. It had been a severe disappointment, since in spite of it all, the boy still saw himself as doing rather amazing work.

All of this meant that at first, even though he was gazing absently down the road to town, he didn't even notice.

When the girl came down the dirt path, the boy just blinked and watched her go by before finally calling out.

“—?” She turned, puzzled: It was really her, the daughter of the alleged mercenary who lived on the edge of town. Her long black hair and her vacant expression looked the same as always. Her backpack was still too big for her, and the heavy-looking sword she carried still made her lean to one side.

The boy decided, then, that it must have been the cheap leather armor she was wearing that had kept him from recognizing her.

“You...,” he began, staring openly at the girl, who was so much slimmer than he was. “You really became an adventurer.”

“Uh-huh.” The girl nodded, then produced her rank tag from the neck of her shirt. The glimpse of the pale skin around her collarbone as she did so set the

boy's heart racing, though he didn't know why; he ignored it and looked at the tag. The chain around the girl's delicate throat carried a small piece of porcelain, and there was a shard of some black rock on a string that quavered as she breathed.

"You sure they're not pulling your leg?"

"I dunno."

"And what's with that rock anyway?"

"It's my prize, from the contest," she said happily, quite ignoring his irritated tone as she let her fingers play across the stone. She touched it as tenderly as a cherished treasure, then tucked both it and the tag back into her shirt. "I had it turned into a charm."

"It looks cheap." The boy added a snort, *hmph*, but the girl just said, "You think?" not sounding the least bit perturbed.

For some reason, that absolutely aggravated the boy, who puffed out his chest and said, "You probably just swung your sword around a bit, right? Against some, like, goblins or something."

"Uh-huh. I mean...I guess?"

"Hell, even I could deal with some goblins."

That was it—he'd do a bit of bragging for her. The boy spoke with all the pride he could muster.

He'd chased a goblin away from the village the other day. He'd waved a stick and flung stones. True, there'd been only one goblin, small and emaciated, and the boy had been running behind a pack of adults. But still, that didn't change the fact that he'd gotten rid of the monster. He was quite proud of himself.

"Huh, really?" The girl showed no special interest in his story, though; she just answered diffidently.

"Better believe it!" Desperate to get a rise out of her, the boy grinned broadly and announced, "This dungeon exploration contest—I guess it was only a game for a bunch of amateurs, huh?"

"Maybe."

“Hey, did you buy a helmet like I told you?”

“...” The girl was quiet for a second before she held back her bangs to show him: Wrapped around her head was a protective leather band. She softly explained that something like this wouldn’t get pulled off.

What a moron, the boy thought. How stupid did you have to be to get your helmet pulled off? He snorted. If *he* were an adventurer, he would buy a helmet, and he wouldn’t be dumb enough to lose it. Supremely confident of his wisdom, the boy looked down on the obviously helpless girl and laughed. But there was a certain satisfaction, too. She’d listened to him and bought a helmet.

Well, there you had it. She hadn’t been able to get a prize from the dungeon exploration contest all by herself; she’d needed help.

“I’ll give you all kinds of advice, then!”

“Gosh, I don’t really think so,” the girl said firmly.

The boy gulped and goggled. She’d never actually said *no* to him before. She spoke in the same small, quiet voice she always did, but it cut him to the quick.

For the first time, the boy looked in the face of this girl he’d known since childhood. Her eyes as she gazed back at him were terribly clear and unflinching, like a deep wellspring. She looked at him the way you might look at a stone on the side of the road, seeing that it was there but nothing more.

“Are you done?” she asked, tilting her head as if puzzled. Some sweet, pleasant smell drifted from her hair as she did so. “Okay, I’m gonna go, then.”

Leaving the boy still dumbstruck, the girl turned, faced forward, and walked off. She had much to do and even more to think about, and she wasn’t sure where to start.

“First, the sewers. First, the sewers,” she kept muttering to herself, even as she reached the gate at the edge of town. That was what the nice receptionist lady had recommended. She’d said they could still be dangerous, though, which made the girl a little scared.

Maybe she would try the training center, too, at some point, but first she wanted to earn a little money. She’d asked around at the Adventurers Guild,

and everyone had agreed that the sewers were the place to start. Getting up the courage to talk to people had been a real challenge, but they were a lot less scary than that contest facilitator. Besides, when she finally found the nerve to strike up a conversation, everyone turned out to be nice.

One young man's group that seemed especially knowledgeable about the sewers had told her, "*A club is your best bet.*" But she still didn't have any money, and she'd never used a club. She'd have to give it a try with her sword.

She'd talked to the old man at the armor shop before setting out, so she knew how much a club cost. Thankfully, he'd been willing to buy the gems she'd gotten from the contest. That had enabled her to get armor, her headband, and some potions. When she'd asked for oil for her lantern, he'd thrown in some perfume oil for free. That made her very happy.

Like that adventurer had said, it was important to stay calm. And she was so excitable.

She hoped there wouldn't be any snakes. She was very scared of snakes. She was pretty sure there weren't any snakes in the sewers.

It had been so hard fighting the goblins by herself. She was sure fighting rats would be *really* hard.

So many things I have to keep in mind...

"...But I'll do my best!"

The girl clenched her fists. Her charm glittered at her neck. The boy she'd just been talking to was already all but gone from her thoughts.

The girl had a name that spread out like a tempest, whirling from the alpha, the very first letter. Rogue-like, she kept walking, sure and steady, the black onyx at her neck.

Ahead of her, the Four-Cornered World spread out, wild and vast.

§

Goblin Slayer sat on the bench, vacantly watching Guild Girl speak to the quest giver. From time to time, adventurers who recognized him would call out to the man in the cheap-looking metal helmet, to which he would inevitably

reply, “I see.”

The rookie adventurers—those who had participated in the dungeon exploration contest—hardly even looked at him as he sat there. Maybe it was the grubby equipment, or maybe they just didn’t have the time and energy to pay him any mind; he didn’t know. He certainly didn’t think he’d had any time to go looking around back when he had been a novice.

Of course, none of them thought the man in the grimy armor might be a Silver-ranked adventurer—why would they? That black-haired girl, she was the only exception. The one who had gotten lost during the event—she would give him a polite bow as they passed each other.

I suppose she’ll become an adventurer. He wasn’t thinking in terms of whether she’d registered with the Guild; she was registered, just as he was.

The girl would surely become an adventurer, though. He didn’t know if it would go well for her, and it was certainly not his place to judge. But the girl had decided to become an adventurer and was doing everything she needed to that end. So she certainly would become one.

What about me?

Yes—what about him?

He let the question drift through his mind. He’d been so busy before the event, but now that it was over—well, here he was. In the grand scheme of things, what had he really done? Just slay some goblins. When it came to creating the labyrinth, setting out traps, and running the contest, he had contributed only the slightest bit.

Everything in this world came down to one thing: Do or do not. His master had taught him that. And if that was the case...

Then I...

His thoughts were interrupted by Guild Girl, who gleefully waved a hand. “Ah, Goblin Slayer, sir! You can come over here now!” Another Guild employee, with a holy symbol hanging from her neck, stood beside Guild Girl; for some reason, she had a little grin on her face that made her look like a cat. *I think she was the one we entrusted to handle things on the surface.* Goblin Slayer grunted softly

and nodded slightly.

Inspector looked surprised for a second, then shook her head and said, “Don’t worry about it,” to Guild Girl before returning to her work.

I’ll have to thank her properly sometime, Goblin Slayer told himself—firmly, so he would remember it, and then he stood across from Guild Girl. She was once again wearing her usual uniform and zipping around behind the counter with all the energy of an excited puppy; she was so busy. Despite how challenging the dungeon exploration contest must have been for her, she showed no sign of fatigue.

“Thank you so much for all your help...,” she began.

“It was no problem,” Goblin Slayer said clearly, seeing Guild Girl go through such pains to apologize. After all, he’d been dealing with goblins. No different from what he always did. No different at all. “It wasn’t that much trouble.”

“Well, I thought it was exciting, helping out with things.” Guild Girl still looked somewhat troubled. She played with her braid; she was smiling but seemed glum. “Although I guess I didn’t help very much...”

“That perfume-oil candy was terrible.”

“_____?” She didn’t seem to understand what he meant and merely looked at him blankly.

Goblin Slayer didn’t worry about it, just went on talking. If he stopped, he was sure he would simply fall silent. His childhood friend often pointed out that he went quiet when he was troubled. “The smell came up out of my belly after I swallowed it. It was quite unpleasant, and it threw me off a little.”

“O-oh, really...”

“But other than that, everything was helpful,” he continued immediately. “Thank you.”

“_____”

Guild Girl didn’t respond. Her expression stiffened for a second before she said, “Wait there a moment, would you?” as if she had just remembered something, then got out of her chair. She disappeared into the back before

emerging at a brisk trot and resuming her place. “*Ahem*, pardon me very much. So, um...after that...” Her words came fluently now, and she had her usual bright smile on her face. “...After that, what happened?”

“I’m afraid most of the contents were lost.”

“Goodness,” she said, blinking. After a second, her smile softened, and she looked down shyly. “That’s all right. It doesn’t matter...”



Ignoring the look on her face, Goblin Slayer spoke slowly and seriously, picking his words carefully: “I would like to replace them for you, but I don’t know much about such items.” He had to tread carefully here. “As far as picking them out—”

“Let’s do it together, by all means!” Guild Girl said, almost jumping out of her seat. Adventurers, quest givers, and employees nearby looked in her direction. She blushed furiously, sat back down, and cleared her throat gently, a process Inspector watched with a barely restrained grin. “...I’d like to ask you to look for the replacements with me. If you’d be so kind.”

“That was my intention, if it’s all right with you.”

“...Certainly.”

“I see.”

So my lessons have borne fruit. Goblin Slayer nodded. There seemed to be no problem. He had improved. In the past, this had been an area of painful failure for him. He was very glad he had avoided simply giving Guild Girl money.

He let out a breath. There, that was a good start. Time to turn to the next order of business, then.

“However, first I must start with goblins.”

“Of course,” Guild Girl said with a smile. “Yes, I understand completely.”

Looking in almost impossibly good spirits, she went into the back room for a moment, nearly dancing as she returned with a sheaf of papers in her hands. Her steps were light, her movements quick and agile. Goblin Slayer thanked her and took the papers.

There was a quest from a remote pioneer village—the usual fare. An emaciated goblin had appeared, and they had chased it off, but they were worried and wanted someone to investigate or hunt the creature down.

The festival and its attendant pleasures notwithstanding, winter was still coming, and it was only natural people would worry about their provisions being stolen. He couldn’t be sure he’d managed to kill all the goblins underground, either. Some may have escaped, and he couldn’t let them live.

Then again, even if this monster wasn't a survivor of his battle, goblins still had to be killed. And he was the one who killed them—it was his role.

Festivals were well and good, but when they were over, one returned to ordinary daily life. That was the way of the world. Nothing to be upset about. To him, festival days and ordinary days both meant just one thing: killing goblins. Goblins hated days when people were enjoying themselves most of all.

First, I'll have to restock the items in my bag.

When his old friend had seen his torn item bag, she'd exclaimed, *"Just leave it to me!"* full of confidence, and had set about mending it. He was sure he could trust her to do the job well. And he would be careful not to make the mistake of letting it get torn again.

If there was one thing that concerned him, it was whether he'd be able to buy another of those Southern-style throwing knives right away. He also wondered if he should talk to his friends (his thoughts caught on that word for a second). If he should invite them to go goblin hunting again...

"I know what that is," a voice said unexpectedly from somewhere above him. "A goblin-hunting quest, right?" The voice was beautiful as a ringing bell. It was the high elf, all but dangling from the second-floor railing. On her face (quite upside down) was a smile, and her long ears were twitching. "Geez, Orcbolg, that's all it ever is with you."

"I see."

He suspected she was right. He couldn't deny it.

High Elf Archer laughed out loud, seemingly amused by the slow nod of the helmeted head. "Gosh. You really are hopeless, to borrow a phrase." She whispered, so softly it almost seemed only her lips formed the words: *"If I didn't invite you on other quests, you'd never do anything else."*

Then one of her fingers, so pale and beautiful it almost seemed otherworldly, was pointed directly at him. "We're going on an adventure—a real adventure! The minute that goblin hunt is over!"

"Yes," he replied, thoroughly uncertain whether he was saying the right thing. "Let's go on an adventure."

AFTERWORD

Hullo, Kumo Kagyu here!

Did you enjoy Volume 13 of *Goblin Slayer*? In this installment, goblins appeared, so Goblin Slayer had to goblin-slay them. I poured my heart and soul into writing it, so I would be thrilled if you enjoyed it.

Ultimately, the world changes, no matter what you do. Little @ girl and the other novice adventurers have come bursting into the Four-Cornered World. The *desire* to do something is crucial, but then you have to actually go and do it!

More and more often recently I've been watching/listening to VTubers while I work. It's great to see them getting all excited over their games. *Power!*

2020 is going to go down as one awfully wild year. The *Goblin Slayer: Goblin's Crown* movie premiered, and *Goblin Slayer* won the German AnimaniA Award.

We're going on twenty novels across the entire *Goblin Slayer* franchise, which is sort of incredible. In fact, it's *completely* incredible; I can't believe I'm even here. As ever, all I've really done is write things that are packed with stuff that interests me personally. Which means the fact that I'm so happy can't be due to my own work but must be thanks to so many different people.

It might seem obvious if you think about it, but nobody writes a book or creates a manga, anime, or game all by themselves. To everyone at editorial, all the staff involved in the anime, everyone overseas, all my wonderful illustrators, and fantastic manga creators. To all my friends who game with me, all the admins of the aggregator sites, and of course all my readers. The *Goblin Slayer* franchise exists because of your joint contributions.

Always and ever, thank you all so much.

Year One is ongoing, and *Dai Katana* is reaching its climax. There's a variety of stuff available surrounding the TRPG, as well as plenty of other plates to keep

spinning. My plan is for the next volume to be about goblins appearing in the northern sea, so that Goblin Slayer has to go goblin-slay them.

I'll pour my all into writing it, so I hope you'll come along for the ride.

See you next time!



GOBLINSLAYER

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